

# *Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism\**

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*For Harry O. Maier* ירצ"ל

Current historical positions on the origins and history of Christian martyrology generally take one of two positions. W. H. C. Frend, in his classic *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, argues essentially that Christian martyrology is a “prolongation and supersession” of Jewish martyrology. In diametrical opposition, G. Bowersock, in his recent *Martyrdom and Rome*, argues that Christian martyrdom has nothing to do with Judaism or with the Palestinian cultural context of early Christianity, but is entirely a Roman cultural product, adapted for Christianity, and later borrowed from Christians by Jews. Both are dependent on the assumption of a clear and virtually absolute separate identity for the two religions in Late Antiquity. In the current essay, I shall try to show that we need to think of much more complex ways that Christianity and Judaism interacted during the crucial second, third, and fourth centuries, as well as of a much more nuanced understanding of the nature of martyrology itself. Martyrology is an overdetermined, multisourced discourse that undergoes significant development within late antique Judaism and Christianity. Many of the new elements can be shown to be shared by both religious groups, and the direction of “influence” is not only one-way. A model of close contact and dialogue between the two emerging “religions” seems to explain best the historical

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developments. The present essay is one part of the first of a series of planned monographs on such contact and dialogue with respect to the religious creativity of Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ENTWINING OF THE WAYS

A third-century Palestinian text tells the shocking story of a Pharisee who was arrested during the Trajanic persecutions of Christianity:

It happened to Rabbi Eli'ezer that he was arrested for sectarianism (Christianity),<sup>1</sup> and they took him up to the βῆμα<sup>2</sup> to be judged.

The ruler said to him: A sage such as you having truck with these matters!?<sup>3</sup>

He said to him: I have trust in the judge.

The ruler thought that he was speaking of him, but he meant his Father in Heaven.<sup>4</sup> He said to him: Since you trust me, I also have said: Is it possible that these gray hairs would err in such matters? *Dimus* [=Dimissus]! Behold, you are dismissed.

1. Jerome knows that the term *mîn*, “sectarian,” is a name for Jewish Christians, as we see from his famous letter to Augustine: Jerome, *Ep.* 112.13 (CSEL 55:381–82). This letter was written about 404, Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period Until its Disappearance in the Fourth-Century* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992), 53. See also M. Friedländer, *Patristische und talmudische Studien* (1868; reprint, Farnborough, England: Gregg International Publishers Ltd., 1972), 62.

2. On the use of this term in Roman legal texts and martyr acts, as well as the parallel *gradus* of the later versions, see Saul Lieberman, “Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the Acta Martyrum,” in *Texts and Studies* (1944; reprint, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 69–71.

3. In the later versions of the text, “these matters” has been revised to “these idle matters,” which I believe must reflect a technical term from Roman legal practice. In any case, I believe that the interpretation of Frend that the judge is ridiculing Eli'ezer here in order to release him is wrong: W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 185. Moreover, Frend's gloss on this phrase, “the rabbi ‘was an old fool to get himself mixed up in this sort of thing’” (222), is exactly upside-down. The reference to Rabbi Eli'ezer's age is an allusion to wisdom, not to foolishness, as anyone with even the merest modicum of Hebrew knowledge would immediately recognize. In support of this, one can offer the *Qohelet Rabbah* version which reads explicitly, “A great man such as you,” Marc G. Hirshman, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*, diss., Jewish Theological Seminary (1982), 1:53. The conclusions that Frend wishes to draw from his palpable misreading are equally invalid, of course.

4. Note the similarity with Jn 6.42–44, where the Jews refer to Jesus' “father,” and he responds by referring to having been sent by “the Father,” or, according to some manuscripts, by “my Father.” For the latter and discussion of other textual variants, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford

In order to avoid being martyred as a Christian, Rabbi Eli'ezer exploits an ambiguity of language. He answers the charge of Christianity, implicitly a charge of disloyalty to the Empire, by indicating his fealty to the Roman *hegemon*. The Rabbi is, however, nevertheless quite distressed. He understands that he would not have been arrested at all, were it not for some sin that he had committed, and he cannot rest until he discovers that sin, for indeed, he does have trust in the Judge of the World that he does not do injustice:

When he had left the βῆμα, he was troubled that he had been arrested for sectarianism. His disciples came in to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. Rabbi Akiva came in and said to him: Rabbi, I will say before you a word; perhaps you will not be troubled.

He said to him: Say!

He said to him: Perhaps one of the sectarians said something to you of sectarianism, and it caused you pleasure.

He said to him: By heaven, you have reminded me. Once I was walking in the marketplace of Tsippori, and I found there Ya'akov, the man of Kefar Sikhnin,<sup>5</sup> and he recounted a saying of sectarianism in the name of Yeshu' the son of Pantiri, and it caused me pleasure, and I was caught by the words of sectarianism, for I violated that which is written in the Torah, "Keep her ways far away from you, and don't come near the opening of her house, for she has brought many victims down!" [Prov 5.8]. (Tosefta Ḥullin, 2.24)

This is a story about a martyrdom, or, rather a martyrdom cunningly evaded. The major motif of this article will be indeed the discourse of martyrdom and its genealogy.<sup>6</sup> In her recent book, Galit Hasan-Rokem

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University Press, 1993), 57. Cf. also Numenius, who says of Plato: "If Plato had openly criticized these things, he would have given the Athenians an opportunity to show again their malice and kill him, just as they had done with Socrates. Now it is not the case that he preferred life to speaking the truth, *but he saw an opportunity to combine life and safely speaking the truth*," cited by Pieter W. van der Horst, "Plato's Fear as a Topic in Early Christian Apologetics," *J ECS* 6 (1998): 11.

5. This place, referred to in other texts in an Aramaicized form as Kefar Sekhania cannot, it seems, be identified with certainty: Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 120.

6. A word about the term "discourse" as used here may be of use. The locution, as I use it (within a particular intellectual tradition, of course), means to indicate the multiple layerings of linguistic and other usages that make up a particular form of practice. Thus, one could speak of "the discourse of colonialism," "the discourse of race," even "the discourse of fashion," precisely to include both literary and other verbal practices, various forms of economic life and exercise of power and the like. In other words, the term intends to capture exactly the sense that textual practice is practice like any other and has its (often deadly) effects in the "real" world. This note is written in response to one of the readers for *J ECS* who objected to the usage.

has written of Jewish martyrologies in midrashic texts from the Talmudic period, “The intertextual connections that are expressed in these stories do not remain enclosed within the inner-Jewish, Hebrew, and rabbinic borders. In these stories are revealed also the connections with universes of discourse with which rabbinic literature carries out ambivalent, tense and even openly polemic relations.”<sup>7</sup> Insofar as martyrdom is, almost by definition, a practice that takes place within the public and, therefore, shared space, *martyria* seem to be a particularly fertile site for the exploration of the permeability of the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity in Late Antiquity.

Jan Willem van Henten ended his recent work on II and IV Maccabees with the following words:

Jewish ideas about martyrdom changed considerably too, also because of developments within the two other monotheistic religions. From the rabbinic period onwards, martyrdom became defined as the sanctification of the Name of the Lord. The great number of versions of the *Midrash of the Ten Martyrs* and the references to lists of ten martyrs from the rabbinic period may lead to the question, can a process of a Jewish canonization of martyrs be observed in late antiquity and the medieval period? This may have been, to a certain extent, an antidote to the extensive veneration of martyrs in Christian traditions, as apparent, among other things, from calendars indicating the anniversaries of the martyrs’ deaths and extensive martyrologies. Questions like this, however, call for another book on the development of Jewish and early Christian ideas about martyrdom and their possible interaction.<sup>8</sup>

The present essay is, if not the book that he calls for, an attempt at one chapter towards such a book. It would be fair to say that at present there are two major theses with regard to the origins of Christian martyrology, which, for the sake of convenience, we can refer to as the Frend thesis and the Bowersock thesis (although neither of these scholars is the originator of “his” thesis). According to Frend, martyrdom is a practice

7. Galit Hasan-Rokem, *The Web of Life—Folklore in Rabbinic Literature: The Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikha Rabba*, in Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 135 and forthcoming in English (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also H. A. Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet,” *JQR* 37 (1947): 269.

8. Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 & 4 Maccabees*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 304. See also the classic Louis Finkelstein, “The Ten Martyrs,” in *Essays and Studies in Memory of Linda R. Miller*, ed. Israel Davidson (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1938), 29–55.

that has its origins securely in “Judaism” and the Church “prolongs and supersedes” the Jewish practice.<sup>9</sup> For Bowersock, on the other hand, Christian martyrdom has virtually nothing to do with Jewish origins at all; it is a practice that grows up in an entirely Roman cultural environment and is then “borrowed” by Jews.<sup>10</sup> It will be seen, however, that both of these seemingly opposite arguments are founded on the same assumption, namely, that Judaism and Christianity are two separate entities, such that it is intelligible to speak of one (and not the other—either one) as the point of origin of a given practice. The proposition here offered is that it is precisely this fundamental assumption that needs questioning. If Christians are Jews and even Rabbis can sometimes be—at least almost—Christians, then the whole question of who invented martyrdom takes on an entirely different character. I shall be trying to show indeed that the making of martyrdom is, at least in part, part and parcel of the very process of the making of Judaism and Christianity as distinct entities. Analysis of the story of Rabbi Eli’ezer will play a role in this thesis, but first some historical reflections.

In his recent works on Judaism in the matrix of Christianity, Jacob Neusner explicitly engages in the analysis of Judaism and Christianity “as *defined* by their intellectuals.”<sup>11</sup> As he has conceptualized it, “A debate unfolded in which the issues were framed so that a confrontation of an intellectual character took place: people arguing about the same things, drawing upon the same logic, appealing to essentially the same facts. . . . [T]here was, in short, an argument, a dialogue, a true debate.”<sup>12</sup> There was much more going on, however, in the interaction between nascent Jewish and Christian orthodoxies than argument, dialogue, and debate between intellectuals, indeed, much more than confrontation. I hypothesize that we should rather think of complex dialectical processes of negotiations of difference and sameness, samenesses masked as differences, and sometimes differences that appear as sameness. We should be looking for and will be finding parallel, and probably

9. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*.

10. Glen W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, The Wiles Lectures Given at the Queen’s University of Belfast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

11. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity: Second Printing, with New Preface and Introduction*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), xvi (emphasis added).

12. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), x.

shared, developments in the most central and prestigious religious practices, as well.<sup>13</sup>

W. H. C. Frend has noted that, according to a document preserved in Eusebius's church history, the famous martyrs of Lyons of 177 had been eating kosher meat, which they must have been purchasing at "a kosher market established for the Jews, and this in turn indicates fairly close personal relations between the Jews and Christians in the city."<sup>14</sup> Another example of this phenomenon is the general observation of both Saturday and Sunday as holy days among fourth-century Eastern monastics.<sup>15</sup> Now, according to Eusebius, this double observance is precisely the marker of the so-called Ebionite heresy: "They observed the sabbath and the other Jewish customs, . . . yet, on the other hand, each Lord's day they celebrated rites similar to ours, in memory of the Saviour's resurrection" (2.27.5).<sup>16</sup> This puts a somewhat different cast on the "problems" that both Origen and Chrysostom faced of those who attended synagogue on the Sabbath and church on the Lord's Day.<sup>17</sup> Jerome complains as well that the Christians imitate the liturgy of the Jews.<sup>18</sup>

13. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 18.

14. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 18. Frend's reasoning is as follows: Biblis cries out under pressure: "She directly contradicted the slanderers, saying: 'How could they eat their children, who may not eat blood even of creatures without reason?'" (H.E. 5.1.26), Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. and ed. Hugh Jackson Lawlor and John Ernest Leonard Oulton (London: SPCK, 1927), 143. These Christians were still, therefore, following the apostolic levitical rule to eat only meat from which all blood had been drained, i.e., meat slaughtered in the Jewish fashion. Le Clerq had argued from this that they must have been purchasing their meat from Jews.

15. Susanna Elm cites a text from the *Historia Lausiaca* which describes a fourth-century Egyptian female ascetic who takes no food except on Saturday and Sunday in order to devote herself more fully to prayer. Susanna Elm, "Virgins of God": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 315. Obviously the reason for her to be eating precisely on those two days is that they are *both* being observed by her as Holy Days, i.e., the Sabbath and the Lord's Day. This double observance was also the case in the Palestinian *lauras* of the fourth century, and in the Pachomian and Nitrian foundations as well: Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (1966; reprint, Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 15, 23, 31.

16. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 89.

17. Nicholas de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 188.

18. Samuel Krauss, "The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers," *JQR* 5–6 (1892–93): 238 n. 2.

In the martyrology of Pionius, it seems striking that it is emphasized that the day of the martyrdom is Saturday and that “they had prayed and taken the sacred bread with water.” Furthermore, in addition to sacrifice, it is highlighted that the sin that the Romans intended to force them to commit was the eating of “forbidden meats.” Since these were obviously not identical to the meats of sacrifice, it follows that these Asian martyrs, as well, were following some version of biblical dietary laws.<sup>19</sup> Polycarp’s martyrdom, upon which so much of Pionius’ is modelled, also takes place on a Saturday. Now, after all of the discussion of the “Great Sabbath” in the literature, does it not seem possible that the very Sabbath which is called the “Great Sabbath” by the (latter-day) Jews is meant, i.e., the Sabbath before Passover, which, according to the Quartodecimani would be the Sabbath before Easter as well, and a most appropriately liturgical occasion for martyrdoms?<sup>20</sup> The only reason for rejecting this interpretation is that, given the other indications of dating in the text, it would make Passover come out improbably early in that year.<sup>21</sup> However, if we do not assume that in every respect this was an actual report of the events, but a highly stylized, theologized account, then the desire to associate the martyrdom of Polycarp with the Passover becomes compellingly plausible, particularly in the light of the evident associations between martyrdom, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the Passover in the text, for which see below.<sup>22</sup> These associations are particularly powerful in those churches that celebrated Easter on 14 Nisan, the day of the Jewish Pesah, the Quartodecimani, because for those churches the associations between the crucifixion and the Passover sacrifice were apparently most powerful.<sup>23</sup> Melito of Sardis’s *Peri Pascha* is perhaps the most palpable Asian example of this nexus.

19. Herbert Musurillo, ed. and trans., *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 137–39.

20. There is an extraordinary irony here, for, as Yisrael Yuval has recently shown, the Jews only began to refer to the Saturday before Passover as the “Great Sabbath” in medieval Ashkenaz and apparently in concert (or competition) with the Christian usage of Holy Saturday.

21. Judith Lieu, *Image & Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 74.

22. Cf. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 82–84 including references to other literature. See also discussion in Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 70–79, which certainly points up the intimate relations between the dating of the Christian Pascha and the Jewish Pesah, especially in the context of the traditions of Asia, as well as the density of associations between martyrdom and Passover, particularly in these churches: Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 77.

23. Israel Jacov Yuval, “The Haggadah of Passover and Easter,” in Hebrew, *Tarbiz* 65 (1995): 5–29.

This brings us naturally to further discussion of that most important case of Christian-Jewish intimacy in Late Antiquity, namely, the very fact that these Christian groups were dependent, symbolically and practically, on Jews to establish the date of Easter. This is not only of significance owing to the implied analogy between Easter and Passover that I have mentioned, but actually implies that these Christians were in some sense clients of the Jewish religious leadership, just as, apparently, the martyrs of Lyons were for their meat. We find the following astonishing text attributed to the apostles by the Quartodecimani: “As for you, do not make calculations. But when your brothers of the circumcision celebrate their Passover, celebrate yours also . . . and even if they are wrong in their calculation, do not worry about it.”<sup>24</sup> The source is Epiphanius quoting a text closely related to the *Didascalia*.<sup>25</sup> Since the Jewish festival was movable with respect to the solar Christian year, this would implicate Christians in a kind of dependence on the Jewish community with respect to the establishment of the date of Easter on a year-to-year basis. It wasn’t until Nicea that this question was settled in favor of the Roman practice of setting Easter on the first Sunday after the solar month following the equinox, i.e., not until then was Easter universally perceived as other than a Christianized version of Pesah.<sup>26</sup> At that point, the Quartodecimani became heretics, and like many heresies, theirs too was a form of “Judaizing,” the description of a process which is almost emblematic for the ways that Christianity and Judaism were finally almost forcibly riven apart from each other. In short, without the power of the Orthodox Church and the Rabbis to declare people heretics and outside the system—“neither Jews nor Christians,” in Jerome’s words, in his famous letter to Augustine<sup>27</sup>—it remains impossible to declare phenomenologically who is a Jew and who is a Christian. The borders are fuzzy, and this has consequences.<sup>28</sup> Religious ideas and innovations can cross the borders in both directions.

24. Peter L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 21.

25. *Ibid.*, 87 n. 37.

26. *Ibid.*, 19–26.

27. See above n. 1.

28. For characteristically astute and sensitive observations, see Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 161–62.



## RABBI ELI'EZER CHRISTIANUS?

Our story illustrates this thesis beautifully. On the one hand, we find here a narrative which, like Jerome, is very anxious to exclude anything Christian from the realm of proper rabbinic Jewish proximity: "Keep her ways far away from you." On the other hand, in this very same narrative, the attractiveness of Christianity to even a centrally-located rabbinical hero, Rabbi Eli'ezer, is brought to the fore, and perhaps even more than this, as we shall presently see.<sup>29</sup>

There is an important interpretative question with respect to this text that needs to be addressed, namely, why did R. Eli'ezer not simply deny his Christianity? Why the evasiveness? An accused Christian had to perform two acts in order to prove his or her "innocence." The first was to sacrifice to the emperor, and the second was to curse Jesus. We have an excellent contemporary description of this practice from Pliny the Younger's famous letter to Trajan:

Those who denied that they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge.<sup>30</sup>

Although to be sure, we cannot assume uniformity and systematization of the judicial process, this text is certainly evocative of the possibilities that were available for proof of non-Christianity.<sup>31</sup> The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* provides further evidence that this was not, at any rate, a mere fluke, as the proconsul offers the aged bishop the option: "curse Christ" [λοιδορήσον τὸν Χριστόν] and "I will release you."<sup>32</sup> Although a Jew could not prove his non-Christian leanings by sacrificing to the Emperor, he could curse Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Why, then, did not Rabbi Eli'ezer simply say: *Christianus non sum*.

29. Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age (70–640 C.E.)*, ed. and trans. Gershon Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 1:292–93.

30. Pliny, *Pliny the Younger: Letters and Panegyricus*, tran. Betty Radice, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 2:402–3.

31. Indeed, as one reader for the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* pointed out, the "whole point of Pliny's letter is to ask advice *because he doesn't know what exactly the procedure is*, not because he is outlining an established practice."

32. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2d ed., revised by Michael W. Holmes (1891; reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 139.

33. Lieberman, "Roman Legal Institutions," 79 and esp. n. 150. Kimelman has interestingly interpreted the notice in Justin Martyr that the Jews "scoff at the King of

*Iudaeus sum?* My teacher, Prof. Saul Lieberman, of blessed memory, raised this problem and offered what I, with all due modesty, take as an intentionally tricky answer itself, namely, that R. Eli'ezer feared further questioning on the "intimate internal affairs of the rabbinic academies."<sup>34</sup> I wish to suggest in all diffidence and respect that the very implausibility of the explanation offered by Lieberman is intended precisely to lead us to a warranted, if highly unsettling, answer.<sup>35</sup> I hypothesize, accordingly, that the text is hinting that R. Eli'ezer did not *want* to curse Jesus. Rabbi Elie'ezer, the text implies, had more than some sympathy to Jesus and his followers and their Torah, an implication that is supported as well, of course, by the Rabbi's irenic Torah conversation with this Ya'kov/James. There are other ways in which Rabbi Eli'ezer's views are kindred to Christianity in cultural/ideological matters, particularly with respect to his attitudes toward sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

There is a double-meaning, a bit of trickster language or indirection, in this text that is not directed at the *hegemon* but perhaps at the very readers of the text. The phrase that I have translated as "arrested for sectarianism" could just as easily be translated from the Hebrew as "arrested by sectarianism," i.e., captured intellectually or spiritually by Christianity.<sup>37</sup> It is important to recall that the tradition itself remembers that Rabbi Eli'ezer himself was declared a heretic by the Rabbis for a

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Israel" after their prayers as owing to the Jewish need to demonstrate to the Romans, at the time of Justin, precisely that they are not Christians for purpose of escaping martyrdom and persecution as such: Reuven Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period*, eds. E. P. Sanders, A. I. Baumgarten, and Alan Mendelson, *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 235.

34. Lieberman, "Roman Legal Institutions," 78.

35. There is indeed evidence that my conjecture is correct, i.e., that the published answer offered by Lieberman was indeed evasive and intended to lead the reader to the suggestion offered here within. In unpublished lectures delivered to his students, Lieberman openly proposed a partial version of the hypothesis that I tender and argue for here. According to Hirshman, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*, 1:52, Lieberman "connected the suspicions of Rabbi Eli'ezer of sectarianism (being Christian) with his excommunication on the part of the Sages in the matter of the Akhnai Stove."

36. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics*, vol. 25 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 47.

37. Rashi, in what I take to be yet another bit of "hidden transcript" making, improbably interprets the phrase to mean "arrested [in order to make him into] a sectarian," i.e., that the Romans were trying to force him to become a heretic. This interpretation is so linguistically strained and so inadequate to the narrative context that it is hard to believe that Rashi intended it as other than a cover-up. Cover-ups upon cover-ups, but ones that leave the marks of the covering all over the place.

period of his life.<sup>38</sup> If, indeed, there is a sort of repressed motive here of this central rabbinic figure's attraction to Christianity, then the point that I am making against drawing strict lines between the histories of what only *much* later became defined as separate religions is considerably strengthened. In inscribing Rabbi Eli'ezer—one of the most canonical and central of rabbinic-culture heroes—in a fictive plot situation that would lead him to extreme marginality and then, in the end, recuperating him, the biographical narrative is inscribing, I suggest, the under-construction, the being-invented, nature of the very divide between Christians and Rabbis in this early period.<sup>39</sup> Martyrology will, as I hope to show, do some important work in this construction project.

At this point, I think that it is important for me to make a vital methodological point. In comparative historical research dealing with Christian and rabbinic documents, there is an ongoing quandary. We have learned certainly that rabbinic legends cannot be taken as historically reliable sources vis-à-vis the events that they purport to recount, and a legend, for these purposes, has to be defined as any narrative for which the only sources we have are in texts hundreds of years after the "events."<sup>40</sup> In contrast to this, after much debate and discussion in the last century, church historians have generally resolved that some of the

38. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, The Lancaster/Yarnton Lectures in Judaism and Other Religions for 1998 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming), chapter 1.

39. The division is always, obviously, a constructed one. My argument, then, is that in this period, much more active work is being done to construct it than would be necessary at later times (although in the early modern period it becomes necessary again, but that is another story). This active work is both diachronic, in that the division is being made through history, and also synchronic, in that certain discursive forces are actively trying to make it appear as a given. We are observing the effects of those forces in our texts.

40. In spite of the presumptions of the Neusner school to have introduced this caveat into rabbinic historiography, it was articulated by Saul Lieberman decades earlier:

The simple rule should be followed that the Talmud may serve as a good historic document when it deals in contemporary matters within its own locality. The legendary portions of the Talmud can hardly be utilized for this purpose. The Palestinian Talmud (and some of the early Midrashim) whose material was produced in the third and fourth centuries contains valuable information regarding Palestine during that period. It embodies many elements similar to those contained in the so-called documentary papyri. The evidence is all the more trustworthy since the facts are often recorded incidentally and casually. The Rabbinic literature has much in common with the non-literary papyri and the inscriptions. (Saul Lieberman, "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *Annuaire de l'institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves* 7 [1939-44]: 395)

This principle is not substantially different from that articulated by Neusner that documents are to be taken as evidence for their own chronotope and not for the one(s) reported on within them.

documents of early martyrology preserved in Eusebius (and elsewhere) can be relied upon, by and large, as virtually contemporaneous with the events which they relate.<sup>41</sup> The strategy that I have adopted in this analysis is the doubly conservative one of maximal skepticism with respect to the Talmudic narratives, tending to date them at the time of the documents, while accepting the consensus of Christian scholarship as

41. This remains, however, a highly ambiguous conclusion. The example of the *acta* of Polycarp is instructive. As T. D. Barnes has put it with respect to another martyrology, "Even if nothing calls into question the basic facts, it is uncertain how far the narrative has been altered in retelling through the third century." Timothy D. Barnes, "Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*," *JTS* n.s. 19 (1968): 525. The same would appear to be the case for Polycarp. The earliest source for Polycarp's martyrology, according to many, is apparently none other than Eusebius, once more the close contemporary of the time of the writing of our midrash and of the Palestinian Talmud. Much current opinion, even now, holds that the form of the text in Eusebius is less interfered with, and thus "earlier," than the form of the text in Ps.-Pionius: Hans von Campenhausen, "Bearbeitungen und Interpolationen des Polykarp-martyriums," in *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1963), 253–301, and see discussion in Gary A. Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion, no. 22 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 122ff. with review of the critical literature. In point of fact, Bisbee sharply asks:

We must ask ourselves. What have scholars meant by an authentic account? By what criteria are the labels "authentic" and "inauthentic" affixed? It is extremely doubtful whether any of the "canonized" acts is completely "authentic," if by "authentic" is meant "the original, unedited account." It is also doubtful that we possess the original text of any letter written by an eyewitness, or the text of an initially edited *commentarius*. In transmitting *acta Christianorum*, martyrologists, from the earliest times it would appear, often, perhaps even usually, did not resist the temptation to edit. Perhaps the community of scholars defines an "authentic account" as a text that is not necessarily the historical original but is demonstrably derived from a historical original. If so, authenticity is a matter of degree. . . . It is only a matter of degree whether the community of scholars calls such a text "a fifth-century text containing readings from the second century" or "a second-century text that has been edited in the fifth century." If texts are treated as "wholes," without regard for editorial layers and the dating thereof, the danger of incorrectly reconstructing history from anachronistic data is great. . . . This is especially true when discussions of origins are involved. (Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts*, 83–84)

Dehandschutter writes that "in the past decades the interpolation theory of H. VON CAMPENHAUSEN has been most influential," Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "The Martyrium Polycarpi: A Century of Research," in *ANRW* II.27.1 (1993): 493. As venerable a scholar as Conzelmann also held that "the original text has again been thoroughly interpolated further in order to concentrate on the one hero, Polycarp, who has to serve as a *model-martyr*," cited by Dehandschutter, "Martyrium Polycarpi," 496. Dehandschutter himself disagrees with the general opinion summarized by Keim who "places the text of MPol in the third century, followed by J. Réville, who is, like Keim, disturbed by the warning against an exaggerated cult of the martyrs, presumably present in MPol, which could only date from the third, not the second century," Dehandschutter, "Martyrium Polycarpi," 492. Given these

to the authenticity of certain of the purportedly early martyr acts. I shall try to show that my hypothesis holds even on this doubly conservative showing, a fortiori were we to accept a more skeptical position with respect to the Christian *acta* or, alternatively, a more credulous one for the Jewish texts.<sup>42</sup> To put this point in other words: Even assuming the earliest possible date for the Christian martyrologies accepted currently as “authentic” by experts in the field, and yet taking a very conservative position on the Jewish martyrologies (i.e., dating them essentially according to the apparent date of redaction of the embedding documents), I still believe that I can show cultural fertilization in both directions, from “Jews” to “Christians” and back. The narrative with which I am dealing here provides a modest case in point. There are two historical contexts that are at least arguably relevant here. First, there is the context of the actual time of the life of Rabbi Eli‘ezer, who could indeed have been in direct contact with a disciple of Jesus. Secondly, there is the historical context in which these stories are told and retold. Rabbi Eli‘ezer, although “fictionalized” in the narratives that we are encountering, is not, after all, a fictional character. There is every reason in the world to believe that such a figure actually lived and taught. He was not, however, as the tradition portrays him, a “Rabbi,” because the rabbinic

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uncertainties, I could have (and was tempted to) adopt a different “conservative” strategy, namely to treat the rabbinic materials and the Christian *acta* as similarly ambiguous as to dating. The point of common Christian and rabbinic development would have been easily made then: Both Polycarp and Akiva are only known from texts of the fourth century, and what is sauce for the “Martyrium Polycarpi” is sauce for the “Acta Akivae” as well. This would have served my argument too neatly, however, and following the prodding of Virginia Burrus, I have changed to the current strategy, less conservative with respect to the authenticity of the Christian texts but more conservative with respect to the thesis of this paper.

For a recent demonstration of the significance of the revisions (or at the least the heavily “gospelized” stylization) in the *Polycarp*, see Miriam S. Taylor, *Anti-Judaism & Early Christian Identity: A Critique of the Scholarly Consensus*, *Studia Post-Biblica*, vol. 46 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 102–4.

42. There is a larger and very interesting question to be pursued here, as well, namely, the tremendous difference between the modes of Christian and Jewish textuality itself in Late Antiquity, Christian texts tending toward the “work” of an author, even, for instance, the martyr acts, while virtually all rabbinic textuality is found in the form of these enormous, somewhat amorphous (by the standards of the logos), authorless, editorless collections of sayings, discussions, and stories collected over hundreds of years and in two widely separated geographical areas, Palestine and Babylonia. This is both a fascinating question for the comparison of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism themselves as religious systems as well as having vital significance for the pursuit of questions such as the one engaging us here, but longer consideration of these issues will have to wait for a future venue, *deo volente*.

movement simply did not exist then. He was a Pharisee, that is, a member of one Palestinian Jewish sect among several, if not many.<sup>43</sup> These sects were not absolutely distinguished from each other, and some were more radical versions of others, or more radical wings of others.<sup>44</sup> It is thus highly likely that, in the first century, one could have been an entirely legitimate Pharisee and also a follower or fellow traveler of the Jesus movement, and the “real” Rabbi Eli‘ezer could have been in this category. I have no knowledge if he was, and I am not arguing for a historical kernel in these narratives.<sup>45</sup> What interests me here is the function that the icon of Rabbi Eli‘ezer and this story about him plays in the figuring and negotiations of contact between Jewish Christians and rabbinic Jews in the third, fourth, and maybe even later centuries.

It is obvious, then, that I am not making any claim whatever that this text teaches us anything about the “real” Rabbi Eli‘ezer and any truck with sectarianism, magic, or heresy that he may or may not have had. I am suggesting that, through the medium of the legend, the Rabbis are, as they do so often, teaching us something of the complexities of their world and their worldview. They are, we might say, both recognizing and denying at one and the same time that Christians are us, both marking out the virtual identity between themselves and the Christians in their world at the same time that they are very actively seeking to establish difference.<sup>46</sup> Rabbi Eli‘ezer is thus the figure who in his person thematizes

43. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishna*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 124–27; Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, no. 55 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

44. “[A]n age gets the heresies that it deserves, as statements in more consequential and radical terms of the unexpressed assumptions and tensions of contemporary belief,” Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, The Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 74.

45. Cf. the positivistic approach of Pritz, who argues that “The *terminus ad quem* [of the text!], given the appearance of Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, must be about 130,” Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 96. Pritz, writing in the 1980s, is still using the methods of Herford who wrote in 1903, or those of Alexander Guttman, “The Significance of Miracles for Talmudic Judaism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 20 (1947): 363–406, who also treated this story as if it “reflected” historical reality of the first or early second century. I would not even mention such a position were it not, unfortunately, still all too characteristic of certain scholars and scholarship, although not nearly as prevalent as Neusner would have us believe.

46. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Differential Equations: On Constructing the ‘Other,’” Lecture (Tempe, Arizona, 1992), 13–14, and see Karen L. King, “Gnosticism as Heresy.” This process goes both ways, of course. A beautiful example is the famous passage in the *Didache* in which the author exhorts the faithful: “but do not let your

the tension between the most “orthodox” space of rabbinism and the most “sectarian” space of Christianity.<sup>47</sup> This story is a representation of the complexities of the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity in the era leading up to the fourth century.

What we learn then from this story is that the Rabbis themselves understood that, in notably significant ways, *there was no difference between Christians and Jews*, and the difference had to be maintained via virtual discursive force, via the tour de force. This was the case, as well, it would seem, with another highly important religious innovation shared between Christians, rabbinic Jews, and others. I refer to what Bowersock has named “the making of martyrdom.”<sup>48</sup>

Bowersock argues that this martyrdom is a new religious creation of Late Antiquity. In his view: “Martyrdom was not something that the ancient world had seen from the beginning. What we can observe in the second, third, and fourth centuries of our era is something entirely new. Of course, in earlier ages principled and courageous persons, such as Socrates at Athens or the three Jews in the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar, had provided glorious examples of resistance to tyrannical authority and painful suffering before unjust judges. But never before had such courage been absorbed into a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward. . . . Martyrdom, as we understand it, was conceived and devised in response to complex social, religious, and political pressures, and the date and the circumstances of its making are still the subject of a lively debate.”<sup>49</sup> I am in agreement with Bowersock on this point. Something new appears in Late Antiquity, something that is different from what had gone before. Indeed, I have made a similar point

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fasts fall on the same day as ‘the hypocrites’ [see Mt 6.16ff. (i.e., the Jews)], who fast on Monday and Thursday. Rather you should fast on Wednesday and Friday,” Robert A. Kraft, trans. and commentary, *Barnabas and the Didache*, vol. 3 of *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), 165.

47. See also Alon, *Jews in Their Land*, 1:183.

48. It is not beside the point to be invoking Brownian particles of language here, since, as in so much else, it was indeed Peter Brown who seemingly first caught this moment: “The martyrs . . . were not particularly noteworthy as men and women who faced execution with unusual courage: as the notables of Smyrna told a later bishop: they were too used to professional stars of violence—to gladiators and beast hunters—to be impressed by those who made a performance of making light of death. Rather the martyrs stood for a particular style of religious experience,” Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, The Carl Newell Jackson Lectures (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 55.

49. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 5.

with reference to Jewish martyrologies in the past.<sup>50</sup> But in order to make this point, we need to be more specific on what we mean by martyrdom.

On some current definitions, Bowersock's point would be simply nonsense. Thus, Jan Willem van Henten has recently defined the "martyr text" in the following fashion:

A martyr text tells us about a specific kind of violent death, death by torture. In a martyr text it is described how a certain person, in an extreme hostile situation, has preferred a violent death to compliance with a decree or demand of the (usually) pagan authorities. The death of this person is a structural element in such a text, and the execution should at least be mentioned.<sup>51</sup>

If this is our definition of martyrdom, then it is obvious that the pre-Christian II Maccabees already contains a martyr text, and we must certainly date martyrdom prior to the second century after Christ.<sup>52</sup> Bowersock, however, has claimed that martyrdom is an exclusively Christian invention, only later adopted by Jews and others. Once more,

50. Daniel Boyarin, "Language Inscribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings: Midrash and Martyrdom," *Representations* 25.4 (1989): 139–51.

51. Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 7.

52. Although, to be sure, II Maccabees is dated anywhere from the middle of the second century B.C. to the middle of the first century A.C., Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 51. [I should note that I far prefer these forms to the currently accepted, B.C.E. and C.E., implying a "common era" that is anything but common.] There is an enormous literature on the Maccabean texts and their relations to martyrology, voluminously cited in the notes to van Henten. I will treat here only that which is directly related to my own argumentation. My strategy is, however, different from that of Bowersock, who considers the very martyrologies within II Maccabees of later provenance than the main text: Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 10. This argument seems less than convincing in the light of the analysis of van Henten throughout. I prefer to suggest that a nascent notion of martyrdom is already present in the very likely "pre-Christian" II Maccabees and that it undergoes very similar development among Jews and Christians in IV Maccabees, Polycarp, the Martyrs of Lyons, eventually Pionius, Akiva, Hanina, *undsoweiter*. It should be mentioned, moreover, that van Henten himself (somewhat confusingly) writes: "2 Macc. 6:18–31 can hardly be called an act of a martyr," Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 101. It should be clearly noted that for van Henten these texts are not historical sources but literary phenomena. Otherwise it would be impossible to make sense of van Henten when he writes that "one should try to explain details in II Maccabees on the basis of the data that the book provides," Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 94 n. 22, animadverting to another scholar, and also on the same page: "The historical context of the martyrdoms in 4 Maccabees is essentially the same as in 2 Maccabees." In both cases, the only plausible interpretation is that the "context" referred to, even as "historical," is the narrative context within the book itself and not some putative extratextual context.



following van Henten's minimalist definitions, such a claim can hardly be entertained, let alone sustained. Bowersock has, correctly in my view, challenged such generic characterizations as "emphasiz[ing] banal coincidences in various narratives of resistance to authority and heroic self-sacrifice as if every such episode constituted martyrdom."<sup>53</sup> It seems, however, that he substitutes for this generic cliché a notion of martyrdom as a single thing, as an essence, that makes it effectively impossible to perceive the complexities and nuances of its history. Rather than a thing, "something entirely new," I propose that we look at the agglomeration of various different and new materials in a late-ancient discourse about dying for God that are added on to the fundamental constituent of preferring death to compliance and that together, in the end, produce that sense of something entirely new.

There must be something else, something new that defines late antique martyrology, something that we cannot find in II Maccabees, at least. Oddly, the characteristic that Bowersock cites, namely, "the conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward," is perhaps the oldest, most clearly pre-Christian element of martyrology. This element is already well attested in II Maccabees, namely, the notion that the martyr is immediately "saved." In the later language, this will be expressed as a conviction that he or she has "earned salvation in a single hour." Only a very special pleading could consider this not a pivotal element of martyrology.<sup>54</sup> I would suggest, rather, that the following are the elements that constitute the novelty of late antique martyrdom as a practice of both Jews and Christians (without yet taking a stand on precedence):

- (1) The crime for which the martyrs was killed was understood as having to do with their essence as Christian or as Jew per se and not as punishment for a specific "criminal" act. The name of Christian or the declaration of

53. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 26–27. Robert Doran, "The Martyr: A Synoptic of the Mother and Her Seven Sons," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, eds. John J. Collins and George W. E. Nickelsburg, Septuagint and Cognate Studies, vol. 12 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 189–221, also is engaged in drawing important distinctions along these lines, if not exactly where Bowersock and I have done so.

54. Christian martyr texts, such as the letters of Ignatius and the *Martyrium Polycarpi* add the christological, i.e., another Jewish motif. *Contra* Hans Werner Surkau, *Martyrien in jüdischer und frühchristlicher Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1938), 126–34. The Quartodeciman affiliations of *MPol* also point in the direction of a "Jewish connection." On this question, see Dehandschutter, "Martyrium Polycarpi," 504; Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 79.

belief in one God was itself now the cause of torture and death.<sup>55</sup> For Christian texts, this is new with the *Martyrium Polycarpi*; for Jews, with the stories about his contemporary, Rabbi Akiva.<sup>56</sup>

(2) In Late Antiquity, for the first time, the death of the martyr was conceived of as a religious fulfillment per se and not just a preference “for violent death to compliance with a decree.” For Christians, such as Ignatius, it was a central aspect of the experience of Imitation of Christ; for Jews, a fulfillment of the commandment to “love the Lord with all one’s soul.”

(3) Powerful erotic elements, including visionary experience, were introduced into martyrology at this time.<sup>57</sup> In earlier versions of martyrdom, other passions are dominant. El’azar in II Maccabees is “glad to suffer these things because I fear him” (II Macc 6.30).<sup>58</sup> In IV Maccabees, the whole proposition is that the piety of El’azar enabled him to prove that “devout reason is leader over our passions” (7.16). Rabbi Akiva and some of his Christian brothers and sisters, squarely antithetically to those earlier forms, suffer torture and death because they are passionately in love with God. These eroticized elements produce effects that have to do with sex and gender systems, as well.<sup>59</sup>

All of these materials are new in the martyrologies of both Christians and Jews of Late Antiquity.<sup>60</sup> Given these definitions, the possibility of Christian origins for martyrology is, at least, intelligible. I am not sure that Bowersock’s historical claim for precedence can be maintained, nor that it can be refuted. Bowersock, however, by posing the issue in the

55. Ekkehard Mühlenberg, “The Martyr’s Death and Its Literary Presentation,” *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997): 87.

56. There is a slight possibility of a form of this element as early as II Maccabees, but there is a great deal of philological doubt there: Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 88–89.

57. Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity*, vol. 2 of *Protocol of the Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies, New Series*, Daniel Boyarin <discussant>, Elizabeth Clark <discussant>, Susanna Elm <discussant>, E. Ann Matter <discussant>, ed. Christopher Ocker (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1995); Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet,” 383.

58. van Henten shows that this expression in II Maccabees “belong[s] to a well established tradition of Israelite wisdom literature,” Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 130. Doran has put this starkly: “In 2 Maccabees, then, people die as a concrete proof of their proper citizenship and the proof of the barbarity of their oppressors,” Doran, “The Martyr,” 201.

59. Daniel Boyarin, “Thinking with Virgins: Engendering Judaeo-Christian Difference,” chapter 3 of *Dying for God* and especially the works cited in n. 139 below.

60. Dehandschutter points out that “one observes that the essential ideas of the Maccabeans are lacking: the atoning power of martyrdom and its substitutional character,” Dehandschutter, “*Martyrium Polycarpi*,” 513.

way that he does, is reinscribing a phenomenological boundary between Jews and Christians, a sort of pure Christianity, pure Judaism, and indeed pure Greco-Romanness, that all my thinking militates against. Thus Bowersock writes at one point: "Christianity owed its martyrs to the *mores* and structure of the Roman empire, not to the indigenous character of the Semitic Near East where Christianity was born. The written record suggests that, like the very word 'martyr' itself, martyrdom had nothing to do with Judaism or with Palestine. It had everything to do with the Graeco-Roman world, its traditions, its language, and its cultural tastes."<sup>61</sup> My argument with Bowersock is not with respect to the historical validity of his chronological arguments but with the model of historical relations between Christians and Jews, Christianity and Judaism, Jews and Rome that it presupposes and reinscribes, with its assumption of phenomenologically, socially, and culturally discrete communities of Jews and Christians and of an absolute opposition between Judaism and Palestine on the one hand, Christianity and the Greco-Roman world, on the other.<sup>62</sup>

Bowersock, it might be said, re-enacts an ancient contention. Already in antiquity, various religious groups contended over the merit of their respective martyrdoms. For instance, the fact of martyrdom was used as a demonstration of religious truth. As Elizabeth Clark has recently phrased it, "[Martyrs] constitute strong 'apologies' for the faith to pagan audiences."<sup>63</sup> The martyrs then served as counters for internal "apologies" within Christianity between groups, as for instance in the Montanist claim that the great number of Montanist martyrs demonstrated that the divine power of the living prophetic spirit resides in Montanism.<sup>64</sup> This claim had to be refuted by other Christians, as we find in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*:

61. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 28.

62. It is quite astonishing that Bowersock nowhere makes reference to the two vital works of Saul Lieberman on these themes: Lieberman, "The Martyrs of Caesarea" and Lieberman, "Roman Legal Institutions." Bowersock maintains this model, *mirabile dictu*, in the face of his own recognition that the Smyrna martyr Pionius' statement that he has been hearing the story of the Witch of Endor discussed by Jews since childhood constitutes "remarkable testimony to the interaction of Jews and Christians in third-century Asia and to the significance of the Jewish population that knew Pionios," Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 48.

63. Elizabeth Clark, "Response," in *Visions and Voyeurism*, 28. For literal parallels between martyrological texts and apologetics, see Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 83–84.

64. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, eds. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. by Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, appendices by Georg Strecker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 135.

I will also quote short passages in which he [the “Anonymous”] thus replies to those who were boasting that they too had many martyrs in their ranks.

“So then, when worsted in all their arguments they are at a loss, they endeavour to take refuge in the martyrs, saying that they have many martyrs, and that this is a reliable proof of the power of that which is called among them the prophetic spirit. But this, as it appears, proves to be absolutely untrue. For it is a fact that some of the other heresies have immense numbers of martyrs, yet surely we shall not for this reason give them our assent, nor acknowledge that they possess the truth. To take them first, those called Marcionites from the heresy of Marcion say that they have immense numbers of martyrs of Christ, but as regards Christ himself they do not truly acknowledge him.”

And shortly afterwards he goes on to say:

“It is doubtless for this reason that, whenever those called from the Church to martyrdom for the true faith meet with any so-called martyrs from the heresy of the Phrygians [Montanism], they sever themselves from them and are perfected, without holding communion with them, for they do not wish to assent to the spirit [that spoke] through Montanus and the women.”<sup>65</sup>

The Montanists and Marcionites are claiming the witness of their many martyrs as proof of the truth of their doctrines and, in the case of the former, of their prophetic spirit, and Eusebius has to refute this claim.

There are rabbinic texts that enter into the same contest; not, of course, the contest between the “orthodox” and “heretical” in Christendom but between the rabbinic Jews (the “orthodox”) and the Christian “heretics,” and precisely on the question of martyrdom. And these texts seem to center in rabbinic tradition on the emblematic figure of Rabbi Akiva, the Polycarp of the Rabbis. Here is a text that, depicting a scene of shared martyrdom, like that of the Phrygians and orthodox in Eusebius, portrays a confrontation between Rabbi Akiva and a certain Papos ben Yehuda:<sup>66</sup>

65. 5.16.20–22. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 161.

66. In an unpublished paper, Shamma Boyarin has demonstrated convincingly that, although Rabbi Akiva objects strenuously to certain midrashic interpretations of this figure, there seem to be no doctrinal or even hermeneutical reasons for his objections. Indeed, from version to version of the stories, the stances are sometimes reversed, suggesting that the only objection to Papos’ arguments was that he was some sort of heretical figure, rendering his midrash as suspect, *eo ipso*, as that of the disciple of Jesus who met Rabbi Eli’ezer. This conclusion, independently reached, supports the interpretation of this figure that I suggest here, Shamma Boyarin, “No Horseplay Allowed!?” unpublished paper (Berkeley, 1998).

Rabbi Akiva says: “With all your soul”: Even if he takes your soul.

Our Rabbis have taught: Once the wicked kingdom made a decree that people should not be occupied with Torah, and anyone who occupies himself with Torah will be stabbed with a sword. Papos the son of Yehudah came and found Rabbi Akiva sitting and teaching, gathering crowds in public, and a scroll of the Torah in his lap.

Papos said to him: Akiva, Aren't you afraid of this nation?

He said to him: You are Papos ben Yehuda of whom they say: “great sage”?! You are nothing but a dunce. I will say for you a parable. To what is the matter similar—to a fox who was walking on the banks of the sea, and he saw the fish gathering together. He said to them, “Why are you gathering?” They said to him, “Because of the nets and the weirs that people bring to catch us.” He said to them, “Come up onto the land, and we will dwell together, I and you, just as our ancestors dwelled together!” They said to him, “You are the fox of whom they say that you are the wisest of animals? You are nothing but a dunce! If now that we stand in the place of our life it is so [that we are endangered], in the place of our death even more and more.” And you also: If now we sit and study Torah about which is written, “For it is your life and the length of your days to dwell on the land” [Dt 30.20]—and it is so [that we are endangered], if we go and become idle from it, all the more so.

They have said: Not many days passed before they arrested Rabbi Akiva and chained him in the prison. And they arrested Papos the son of Yehuda and chained him with him.

He said: Papos! What brought you to here?

He said to him: Blessed art thou, Rabbi Akiva, for you have been arrested for the words of Torah. Woe to Papos, who has been arrested for *superstitio*.<sup>67</sup> (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 61b; Oxford Opp. Add. Folio 23)

In this story, an ambivalently emplaced Jewish figure invites Rabbi Akiva to abandon his study and practice of Torah, indicating that, if he comes and joins him, he will be safer. Rabbi Akiva refuses the invitation, producing a parable to support his refusal. In the parable, the men who wish to catch the Jewish fish are the Romans, and Papos is the fox who wishes to tempt them to join him on land where they will be safe. The fish answer that if they are endangered in their natural habitat, the water, they will be in even greater mortal danger if they abandon that habitat. The application of the parable follows in the form of the continuation of the story. Both the “fish” and the “fox” end up being hunted and caught

67. The Hebrew is דברים בטלים, idle matters. It is used here and in the Babylonian Talmudic version of the story of the arrest of Rabbi Eli'ezer as the name of a charge of which the Romans would accuse one. There, it is clearly Christianity of which the charge consists.

by the “men.” The fox, however, now confesses to the fish that he is in worse shape than they, for his death is meaningless, while theirs is momentous.

I tentatively suggest that what we have here is a story of contention over martyrdom between rabbinic and Christian Jews—from the rabbinic perspective, of course. There is from this perspective a great irony in the fact that Jews who have abandoned the traditional practice of the Jews by becoming Christians end up in greater danger than they were in to start with. I speculate that in the late Babylonian tradition, Papos ben Yehudah, always an ambiguously liminal figure in rabbinic tradition, was supposed a Jewish Christian. There is not a lot of evidence that this Papos is a figure for a Christian, but there is some. It is clear from the very context of the story that Papos has also been arrested for a religious crime, else he would presumably not be sitting in the same cell with Rabbi Akiva, the Confessor. His crime was clearly not teaching Torah, as he himself admits in the story. There is another text in which the Hebrew term, דברים בטלים, is explicitly a reference to Christian sectarianism, perhaps in these instances a calque on the Latin *superstitio*, so this does not seem to me to be too far-fetched here.<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, there is direct evidence from within the tradition of the Babylonian Talmud itself that Papos was understood as a Christian. The following quite fantastic controversy will bring this out:

“One who inscribes on his flesh [is punishable by death]”: We have been taught, Rabbi Eli‘ezer said to the sages, “But the son of Satda brought the magic books out of Egypt by inscribing them into his flesh.”

In contradiction to the Mishna that indicates that writing on the body is a capital crime according to the Torah, Rabbi Eli‘ezer cites an authority who actually engaged in this practice. For him, obviously, this authority is a definitive one, but his fellows disagree:

68. According to Lieberman, the Hebrew translates rather the Latin *inania*. Tending slightly to favor my conjecture—and it is no more than that—is the fact that the judge would be expected to make a statement that incriminates the defendant at this point in the trial, as pointed out precisely by Lieberman himself, “Roman Legal Institutions,” 80–81, but not in connection with our text. On the other hand, in a document roughly contemporaneous with the midrashic and Talmudic forms of our story, the Palinode of Calerius, Christianity is referred to as *stultitia*, “folly,” see also Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32. Our דברים בטלים, could conceivably reflect such a terminology as well. In any case, it must be remembered that the earliest form of the text in the Tosefta (if the textual tradition is to be believed) only has “these matters,” and whatever דברים בטלים refers to would seemingly indicate a later Latin usage and not an earlier one.

They said to him: "But he was a fool, and we do not bring proof from fools."

As we shall see immediately, the authority whom Rabbi Eli'ezer cited was none other than Jesus of Nazareth, who is occasionally styled in rabbinic literature "the pious fool." The Talmud, however, does not understand why he is referred to here as the son of Satda:

The son of Satda?? He was the son of Pandira!

Rav Hisda said: The husband was Satda; the paramour was Pandira.

The Talmud refers here to the Jewish slander-tradition, known at least as early as Celsus, that Jesus was the bastard son of a Roman soldier named Panthera.<sup>69</sup> However, the Talmud has a strikingly different tradition as to who the cuckolded husband of Mary was:

69. There is an enormous literature by now on this name and its meanings: R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud & Midrash* (1903; reprint, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1978), 39; Krauss, "Jews in the Fathers," 43–44; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Jesus in the Talmud," in *Rabbinic Essays* (1951; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1973), 473–570; Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (München: C. H. Beck, 1924), 1:538. I believe that the most likely explanation was given over a hundred years ago by Paulus Cassel and has been forgotten. Origen remarks in his commentary on Jn 20.14 that Jesus was born ἐκ παρθένου, but the Jews say that he was born ἐκ πορνείας. Some scholars have been led, therefore, to see in Pandera a "corruption" of *porneia*, Krauss, "Jews in the Fathers." This is obviously not satisfactory, but it does, I think, suggest the direction to a better explanation. My guess is that there were Jews who had a better gibe at the Christian claims. The Christians claim that he was born ἐκ παρθένου, but he was really born ἐκ πανθήρος. I am therefore inclined to strongly accept the conjecture of Paulus Cassel, "Caricaturnamen," in *Aus Literatur und Geschichte* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Friedrich, 1885), 334, that *Panthera* is an intentional distortion of *Parthenos*. I believe that he was wrong, however, in concluding that this was meant as "son of a Panther." Adolf Deissmann has proved that "Panthera" was a fairly well-attested name in the Imperial period and attested as the name of Roman soldiers, including one of apparently Semitic origin whose first name was Abdes. He concluded, therefore, mistakenly in my opinion, that "*Panthera* was not an invention of Jewish scoffers," Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, 4th ed., trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (London: Houlder and Stoughton, 1927), 74. However, his correct assertion that it is an attested name hardly discredits the notion that Jews attributed this cognomen to Jesus as a taunting deformation of παρθένος. Indeed, if anything, this makes a much stronger case for this interpretation. This would be a fine example of the form of Jewish taunts against Christians and pagans that Lieberman used to call cacophemism. This "discovery" was made once more by L. Patterson, "Origin of the Name Panthera," *JTS* 19 (1918): 79–80. It seems to me more appealing than any that has been put forth since. The practice itself is explicitly recognized within rabbinic literature. Thus the Talmud remarks in one place: "All places which are named for idolatry are given perjorative appellations. What is named

But the husband was Papos the son of Yehudah!  
 Rather, his mother was Satda.  
 But his mother was Mary Magdalene!<sup>70</sup>  
 Rather, as they say in Pumbeditha, This one strayed (satat da) from her  
 husband.<sup>71</sup>

(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 104b, only in MSS.)

We learn much from this remarkable passage.<sup>72</sup> First of all, once more we find Rabbi Eli'ezer citing Torah for authoritative halakhic purposes in the name of Jesus. Most important, however, for our immediate purpose is that a late Babylonian tradition associates Papos the son of Yehudah with Christianity, to the extent that he was actually a member of the Holy Family.<sup>73</sup> It is not, in fact, excluded that "Papos" was a form of Josephos, or at any rate, was so understood.<sup>74</sup>

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פני אלהי' [Face of the goddess] is called פני כלב' [Face of the dog]" (Tosefta AZ 6.4)," and the medieval Jewish authority asserts that the same must be done for apostates. Thus, calling Jesus the "Son of Panthera," instead of the "Son of Parthenos" would seem to be a very plausible explanation indeed. See also Henry Chadwick, trans. and ed., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 31 n. 3.

70. The usual Syriac and Aramaic term for Mary Magdalene was מרים מגדלא שערסא רנשא, Miriam the plaiter of women's hair, a sort of pun or folk-etymology of Magdalene. This "error" in the tradition is not necessarily evidence for lack of contact of the producers of this narrative from living Christian usage, as, by the fifth century, popular Christian traditions were also confounding the two Marias, as I have learned from Karen King.

71. Cf. "Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where *the mother of Jesus* is described as having been *turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera*," Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 31.

72. David Rokeah, "Ben Stara is Ben Pantera," in Hebrew, *Tarbiz* 39 (1969): 9–18.

73. This is clearly a late tradition. Earlier rabbinic texts have Papos as a somewhat extreme, perhaps deviant ("gnostic"?) rabbinic figure. His association with Christianity and indeed with the Holy Family has been variously accounted for. For one typical, if not very convincing, attempt, see Herford, *Christianity in Talmud & Midrash*, 40. Our narrative itself, as we have it, seems ruptured precisely at the point of Papos' arrest. If he was opposed to Rabbi Akiva's provocation of the Romans and presumably discreet about his own religious practices, then why was he arrested? The gap in the story may reflect the historical shift in the tradition about him from deviant Rabbi to Christian heretic, which the "Holy Family" story reflects. In the earlier version, he was perhaps a conservative, somewhat pro-Roman figure opposed to this newfangled invention of martyrdom; in the later, he is a sectarian martyr, who has to "confess" to Rabbi Akiva that the latter's martyrdom is worthier than his own. For an early report that "Gnostics" precisely keep their views secretive and don't believe in martyrdom, see Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 11. It would be foolhardy to see in this any but the most tenuous of similarities, but, insofar as the seeking of martyrdom through public confession is indeed a religious innovation, then it is not



I think, therefore, that it is not unjustified to see in the dialogue between Rabbi Akiva and this Papos that I have cited above a reflection precisely of competition for martyrdom between rabbinic and Christian Jews as late as the third or maybe even fourth centuries. As a final suggestive point, at least, if not evidence for the line of interpretation that I am taking here, one might think that Rabbi Akiva's parable is connected with the Christian figure of the apostles as fishers of men (Mk 1.17; Lk 5.10).<sup>75</sup> Papos, the Christian "fox," proposes to the persecuted rabbinic Jewish fish that they would be safe on land with him, out of the sea of Torah.<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Akiva's parable indicates precisely what the narrative enacts. Even outside of the river of Torah, the fish are likely to be caught and killed, and, in the meantime, they have abandoned that which guarantees them life eternal. The rabbinic text places this view in the mouth of the "Christian" fisher of men who confesses "Blessed art thou, Rabbi Akiva, for you have been arrested for the words of Torah. Woe to Papos, who has been arrested for *superstitio*."

"WHOSE MARTYRDOM IS THIS?":  
THE DECIAN PERSECUTIONS AND THE MIDRASH

In the following text from the late third-century midrash on Exodus, the Mekhilta, I believe that we can discover the same sort of contestation over the discourse of martyrdom. This reading of the text is quite different from the way it has been taken until now:

*This is My God, and I will beautify Him* (Ex 15.2): Rabbi Akiva says:  
Before all the Nations of the World I shall hold forth on the beauties and  
splendor of Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be! For, lo, the

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surprising that religious conservatives, whether Christian or Jewish sectarians, would be in opposition to it. It was Jesus' apparent desire for death, as described in the Gospels, that granted him the title "The Pious Fool" in rabbinic texts, a title reflected in our Talmudic passage. It is fascinating that the evident fact that this is a late Babylonian tradition indicated to an earlier generation of scholars that it has "no historical value" (Rokeah, "Ben Stara," 15), whereas for me, this is precisely its historical value! Papos is apparently a short form of Josephus, as argued originally by Cassel, "Caricaturnamen," 341, who points to the modern Italian "Pepi."

74. Cassel, "Caricaturnamen," 341.

75. This nexus was suggested to me by my friend, Galit Hasan-Rokem. For another Christian version of the topos of fish out of water, see Antony 10 in the alphabetical *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. See also Chitty, *Desert a City*, 6.

76. One is reminded with some amusement of Celsus's comparison of Jews and Christians to "worms and frogs disagreeing with each other," Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 199.

Nations of the World keep asking Israel, “What is thy Beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?” (Song 5.9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, We have loved you unto death, (*‘ad mwt*) “for thus do the maidens (*‘almwt*) love Thee” (Song 1.3)—and it is said, “for Your sake we have been killed all the day” (Ps 44.23). You are beautiful, you are heroes, come merge with us!

Israel describes the beauty of her God in response to an initial Gentile approach to the Jews to merge with them. The Gentiles cannot understand who this God is that for him the Jews are willing to be killed all the day. Israel replies in a response suffused with the eroticism of the Song of Songs:

But Israel reply to the Nations of the World: Do you know Him? Let us tell you a little of His Glory: “My beloved is white and ruddy, braver than ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is curls as black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set. His cheeks are like perfumed gardens, yielding fragrance. . . . His palate is sweetmeats and He is altogether desirable; this is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.” (Song 5.10ff.)

At this point, hearing all of this praise and of the beauty of the divine lover, the Gentiles wish now to join Israel instead:

And when the Nations of the World hear all of this praise, they say to Israel, Let us go along with you, as it is said, “Whither is thy Beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy Beloved turned, that we may seek Him with thee?” (Song 6.1)

But Israel reply to the Nations of the World: You have no part of Him; on the contrary, “My beloved is mine, and I am His; I am my Beloved’s, and He is mine; He feedeth among the Lilies.” (Song 2.16 and 6.3)<sup>77</sup>

This text signals its connection with martyrdom in several ways. First of all, explicitly: the question that the Jews are asked is why are you willing to die for your God, and the verse of the Psalm that is cited, “For your sake we are killed all the day,” is a topos of Talmudic martyrologies.<sup>78</sup>

77. I have generally followed here the elegant translation of Judah Goldin, ed. and trans., *The Song at the Sea: Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 115–17, only modifying it where my manuscripts have a better reading.

78. In addition to the texts cited here, see TB Gittin 57b, where the account of the mother and her seven sons is introduced by this verse and, in addition, where it provides the link to a previous martyr story in the same passage in which the same verse was quoted. The verse is also cited in Eikha Rabba 1.16. For discussion see Doran, “The Martyr,” 193.

Secondly, intertextually: Rabbi Akiva himself is the prototypical Jewish martyr. This is brought out beautifully in an otherwise curious but nevertheless insightful scholarly comment from the previous generation: “Rabbi Akiva himself stated on the scriptural words, ‘He is my God and I will praise Him (*Exod.xv.2*): I shall speak of the splendour. . . . The biblical phrase ‘my Beloved is white and red’ *alludes to the ecstatic vision* which was given to the martyrs in the days of their torments, and at the hour when they gave up their ghost.”<sup>79</sup> The oddness of this interpretation is, of course, that it positivistically attributes the text to Rabbi Akiva himself. Since, however, Rabbi Akiva was the first of the martyrs of his time,<sup>80</sup> he could hardly have expounded upon the ecstatic vision which those martyrs beheld. The comment may nevertheless be recuperated for its insight, because it is virtually certain that it was not Rabbi Akiva himself who authored the text. Instead, then, of a problematic “historical text,” we have, therefore, a semifictionalized representation (a pseud-autobiography) that does allude to the ecstatic visions of dying martyrs and attributes them to Rabbi Akiva as the prototype.<sup>81</sup> Given, then, that this text is a portrayal of a martyrology, the similarity with the Christian martyrologies of the same period becomes striking. Rabbi Akiva is privy to a vision indeed. This vision, moreover, renders him and (by metaphorical extension) the whole martyred People of Israel brides of God—female, desiring subjects who render their desire in graphic description of the body of the desired divine male.<sup>82</sup> Precisely because the desired object

79. Yitzhaq Baer, “Israel, the Christian Church, and the Roman Empire from the Time of Septimius Severus to the Edict of Toleration of A.D. 313,” in *Studies in History*, eds. Alexander Fuks and Israel Halpern, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 82.

80. “And when Rabbi Akiva was executed in Caesaria, the news reached Rabbi Yehudah ben Baba and Rabbi Ḥaninah ben Teradion. They rose and girded their loins with sackcloth. . . . In a short time from now, no place will be found in Palestine where bodies of the slain will not be thrown” (*Semaḥot*, VIII, 9). This is an obviously very late text and I am only citing it as evidence for the *traditional* status of Rabbi Akiva’s being the first of the martyrs.

81. We are, of course, immediately reminded of the vision of the about-to-die Stephen in Acts 7.58.

82. For discussions of gender shift in the direction of male to female in antiquity, see Elizabeth A. Clark, “Sex, Shame, and Rhetoric: En-Gendering Early Christian Ethics,” *JAAR* 59 (1991): 221–45; Verna E. F. Harrison, “Receptacle Imagery in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s Anthropology,” *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989): 23–27; eadem, “A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa’s First Homily on the Song of Songs,” *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993): 34–38; Daniel Boyarin, “‘This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel’: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 474–506. Note that even in the “original” Song of Songs, itself, that is, not as

is male, within the normative heterosexuality of the text, the desiring subject is gendered female, whatever her sex. In other words, the martyr is bride of God, here as in the stories of Eulalia or Agnes.<sup>83</sup>

Elizabeth Castelli has presented a critical feminist description of these martyrologies in some detail and has uncovered certain phenomena that emblemize them. First of all, there is the explicit thematization of sight that is the center of Castelli's argument.<sup>84</sup> One of the striking features of both Christian and Jewish martyrologies is the visual eroticism of the experience as represented by the texts.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, there is the collapsing of time that the martyrdom text enacts. Castelli has elegantly identified "a desire to situate contemporary readers/hearers in continuous relation to events of the distant and more recent past in which divine activity has touched human existence directly. The writer promises that the text will create an intimacy between those who suffered, those who were direct witnesses to that suffering, and those who hear or read about it all later. The writing is about bringing the reader into the event, and situating that event within a continuous historical passage."<sup>86</sup> Peter Brown refers to this as time being "concertinaed" at a martyr's shrine.<sup>87</sup> Third, there is a kind of gender-bending in martyrologies of Late Antiquity.<sup>88</sup> The midrash, then, has powerful similarities to the martyrologies discussed by Castelli. First, there is the obvious and explicit eroticism of the experience of

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midrashically or allegorically read, this passage is an eloquent representation of female, ocular desire. To be sure, the desiring female is caught and beaten by the guardians of the city, but the text seems to be "on her side," and thus to be protesting the denial of desiring eyes to women, just as it is at the end of the Song when her brothers punish her. For an excellent reading of the representation of female desire in the Song of Songs, see Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 118–43.

83. Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *J ECS* 3 (1995): 25–46.

84. Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 2.

85. Jacqueline Amat, *Songes et visions: L'au-delà dans la littérature latine tardive* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1985), 67; K. Holl, "Die Vorstellung vom Märtyrer und die Märtyrer-Akte in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze Zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. II: *Der Osten* (Tübingen, 1928), 68–102.

86. Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 9.

87. Brown, *Cult*, 81: "[T]he hagiographer was recording the moments when the seemingly extinct past and the unimaginably distant future had pressed into the present." See also Daniel Boyarin, "Midrash and Martyrdom," which explicitly treats the collapse of time in the martyrology and in the midrash.

88. Both Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 16–17, and Burrus, "Reading Agnes," make the point that the martyr texts first pose a vision of gender-reversal that offers autonomy to the female and then replace her ambiguously within conventional gendered roles.

death projected for the martyr. In our midrashic text, this is made palpable through the use of the Song of Songs as its dominant intertext. Secondly, and equally striking, the midrash reproduces too that which Castelli remarks as the explicit intent of the writers of martyrologies to render possible for readers to experience the erotic intimacy with God, now lost, that the martyrs had, as well as a prophetic or apocalyptic moment also.<sup>89</sup> Third, there is the translation of Israel and its male mystics and religious adepts as desiring female virgins.

### RABBI AKIVA AND THE INVENTION OF JEWISH MARTYROLOGY

The extant *acta* of Rabbi Akiva himself are indicative of a turn in rabbinic martyrology taking place just about the time of the central focus of these investigations, the fourth century. I begin with the continuation of the Babylonian Talmudic narrative that I cited above of the arrest of Rabbi Akiva:

In the hour that they took Rabbi Akiva out [to be executed], his disciples said to him, “Our teacher, so far [i.e., Is this necessary?].” He said to them, “All of my life I was troubled by this verse, ‘And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul’—even though he takes your soul, and I said, when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it? Now it is come to my hand, shall I not fulfill it?” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 61b)<sup>90</sup>

89. Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 11, 14. In my earlier discussion of this text: Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 119–24, esp. 124, I had made this precise argument for the Jewish martyrologies without knowing anything at the time about the Christian texts. In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the author writes: “that which we have heard and have touched with our hands we proclaim also to you so those of you that were witnesses may recall the glory of the Lord and those that now learn of it through hearing may have fellowship with the holy martyrs and, through them, with the Lord Christ Jesus,” Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 107–9. As Castelli so tellingly sums it up, “The recounting of Perpetua’s (and Saturus’s) visions, and the eventual martyrdoms of all in their party, are framed by a desire to situate contemporary readers/hearers in continuous relation to events of the distant and more recent past in which divine activity has touched human existence directly” (*Visions and Voyeurism*, 9). This is an exact parallel to the strategies of the midrashic martyrology which are to perform a collapse of time enabling the hearers of the text to see and experience that which the martyr experienced of erotic connection with God. In the midrashic text, this is thematized via the verse of Psalms, “that which we have heard, we have seen” [Ps 48.9].

90. Some of the material in the following paragraphs has been adopted (and significantly adapted) from Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 125–28; Daniel Boyarin, “Midrash and Martyrdom.”

The ideology of death as the necessary fulfillment of the love of God appears often in texts contemporary with the midrashic text. Thus we read in a halakhic text of the period: "And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul: [This means] even when he takes your soul, and so it says, 'For your sake we have been killed all of the day.'"<sup>91</sup> This text is particularly significant, because it brings into the textual complex the exact same verse of Psalms which seems so intrusive in the midrash of Rabbi Akiva: "For your sake, we have been killed." It seems that while we cannot speak of any precise historical background which determines the midrash, we can grasp hold in it of a very crucial cultural moment—common to late antique rabbinic and Christian Jews—the moment of the creation of the idea of martyrdom as a positive religious value per se. True, in the past also there was a concept of martyrdom, but it was very different from this one. The former model was that of the Hasmonean period, in which the martyr refuses to violate his or her religious integrity and is executed for this refusal; now we find martyrdom being actively sought as the only possible fulfillment of a spiritual need and a spiritual requirement. To put this in more classical Jewish terminology: In the past martyrs refused to violate a negative commandment (to worship idols); in the present, they are fulfilling through their deaths a positive one (to love God).<sup>92</sup> This text then certainly gives the lie to Frend's ratio that "the Jew might accept death rather than deny the Law. The Christian gave thanks that he had been offered the chance of martyrdom."<sup>93</sup> Frend can only make such a

91. Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (1939; reprint, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 6:5.

92. For the differences, see Moshe David Herr, "Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," in *Studies in History*, eds. David Asheri and Israel Shatzman, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 23 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 104–5. As Herr makes clear, in I Maccabees, we find "the diametric opposite of a martyr-consciousness" (n. 66). Even in II and to a lesser extent in IV Maccabees, the models are more of the noble death, like that of Socrates or Antigone (n. 69), certainly one of the tributaries of the river that becomes late antique martyrdom, than the truly theologized and eroticized forms that we find later among both Christians and rabbinic Jews. This is entirely consistent with the picture that I am drawing here of a common history of cultural development. Herr, one of the most established of Hebrew University historians of the old school, is not too far from Bowersock in some respects. Thus, he writes, "The martyr consciousness evoked no real echo among Jews in Palestine. . . . On the other hand, a martyr-consciousness became increasingly prevalent among the gentile nations, and was especially frequent both as a phenomenon in real life and as a conscious attitude and ideal among the philosophers and seekers of libertas at Rome and the provinces," Herr, "Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," 105–6.

93. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 99. Our text is more likely to suggest support for Bowersock's chronological reconstructions with respect to this aspect of

statement precisely because for him “the Jew” is a creature that no longer exists in Late Antiquity.

The astounding thing is that we can almost actually catch this transition happening in our texts: “When Rabbi Akiva died a martyr’s death, a verse from the Song of Songs was applied to him, ‘Yehoshua ben Yonathan used to say of those executed by the wicked Turnus Rufus. They have loved thee much more than the former saints, “sincerely they have loved thee.”’” There were, indeed, saints in former times, that is, those who were willing to die for the faith, so why have Rabbi Akiva and his fellows “loved thee much more than the former saints”? I would claim that this is because they died with joy, with a conviction not only that their deaths were necessary, but that they were the highest of spiritual experiences. Another way of saying this would be to spotlight the eroticism of these texts. They are all about love, about dying for God. The new in martyrology is the eroticization of death for God, the representation of martyrdom as consummation of love; and it was new, it seems, for both Christians and Jews.

This transition is identifiable in the parallel story of Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom in the Palestinian Talmud:

Rabbi Akiva was being judged before the wicked Tunius Rufus. The time for the reading of the “Shema” [“Hear O Israel”, which includes the verse, “Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul!”] arrived. He began to recite it and smile. He said to him, “Old man, old man: either you are deaf, or you make light of suffering.” He said, “May the soul of that man expire! Neither am I deaf, nor do I make light of suffering, but all of my life I have read the verse, ‘And thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your property.’ I have loved him with all my heart, and I have loved him with all my property, *but until now, I did not know how to love him with all my soul.* But now that the opportunity of loving him with all my soul has come to me, and it is the time of the recital of the ‘Shema’, *and I was not deterred from it, therefore, I recite, and therefore I smile.*” (Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 9.5)<sup>94</sup>

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the discourse of martyrdom. But for Frensdorff, who considers Macabees an example of “late Judaism,” anything that Jews are doing by the fourth century just doesn’t exist. See previous note.

94. On this text, see Saul Lieberman, “On Persecution of the Jewish Religion,” in Hebrew in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume: Hebrew Section* (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), 222–23. Compare also the following:

Abba Moses the Ethiopian himself would say, “If we keep the commandments of our fathers, I stand your surety before God that no barbarians come here. But if we do not keep them, this place must be laid desolate.” The day came when the brethren were sitting with him, and he said, “To-day barbarians are coming to Scetis: but rise up and flee.”

In this text, we catch Rabbi Akiva in the act, as it were, of discovering that dying is the way to fulfill the commandment of loving God.<sup>95</sup> Like the nearly contemporary Sabina, Akiva smiles at the prospect of being martyred. There also, the temple warden was nonplussed and asked, “You are laughing?”<sup>96</sup> There *is*, after all, something very “Roman” in this laugh of the martyr: “‘How exalted his spirit!’ Cicero exclaims at Theramenes’ ability to jest while drinking the fatal poison,” but how different the explanation for that laugh, the story that is told about it.

Furthermore, we find here the innovation of the deep connection between the reading of the *Shema*, the “Unification of God’s Name,” with martyrdom. I would suggest reading the “unification of the Name” at the moment of death as the functional equivalent of the final declaration of the Christian martyr: “I am a Christian,” just before her or his death. Ekkehard Mühlenberg has written that “[t]he public identification with the Christian name is the last word, followed by death.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly, we could say that the public identification with the words “The Name is One” is the last word, followed by death. In other words, a transformation has taken place in which it is no longer the facts of Jewish observance, teaching of Torah, alleged *maleficium*, violation of the *lex Cornelia de sicariis* that are at issue, but, just as in the Christian martyrologies, “[i]t is not special laws or the life styles of the Christian existence, but . . . the belonging to the one God, and that excludes the claims of any other powers.” The crucial function of this transformation is that it is this moment which most completely serves to enable the martyrology to serve the production of “group identity and self-definition. . . . The confession ‘I am a Christian’ binds the martyr with all Christians everywhere,”<sup>98</sup> and so also the confession, “Hear O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One” binds the martyr with all Jews everywhere. This element in the development of both Christian and

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They say, “Then are you not fleeing Abba?” *He answered, “For so many years have I been looking forward to this day, that the words of the Master Christ might be fulfilled which he spake, ‘All who take the sword shall die by the sword.’”* (Alphabetical Collection, Moses 10; cited by Chitty, *Desert a City*, 60–61).

I hardly deny, of course, the significant differences between the stories, but I find compelling the parallel of a reference to many years of waiting to see a Scripture fulfilled and then accepting danger and suffering with pleasure because of this completion.

95. See Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet,” 366.

96. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 59–60.

97. Mühlenberg, “Martyr’s Death,” 89.

98. Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 82–83.



Jewish martyrology is most critical in producing the moment of identification with the martyr, even, and especially, for those communicants who are themselves no longer in a situation of persecution. In other words, this new component serves in the production of a “cult of martyrs” as a fundamental formative constituent in the making of the “new” religions of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, and we observe then eminent structural and theological parallelism between the developing genre of Christian and of Jewish martyrologies of the second, third, and fourth centuries.

The two Talmudic narratives are then not two different accounts of the same event, the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva, but of two historically distinct states in Jewish religious history. The two Talmuds tell the story of the making of a new Jewish martyrology. Was this cultural event, however, earlier or later than the nearly identical one that was taking place in the Christian orbit? Scholars of the historical-philological school of The Science of Judaism have read our Mekhiltan text as a reflection of events that took place in the time of its speaker, Rabbi Akiva, who died a martyr's death a few decades before the martyrdom of Polycarp. Thus, the leading scholar of rabbinic thought, E. E. Urbach, argues with regard to our text, “Hadrian's decrees and the *consequent facts* of martyrdom as the supreme expression of the Jew's love for his Creator gave rise to interpretations that discovered in Canticles allusions to Jewish martyrology and the to the uniqueness of Israel among the nations of the world. Rabbi Akiva already expounded, ‘I shall hold forth.’”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, the historian Yizhak Baer argued in a text that I have already cited that “Rabbi Akiva himself stated on the scriptural words, ‘He is my God and I will praise Him (*Exod.xv.2*): I shall speak of the splendour. . . . The biblical phrase ‘my Beloved is white and red’ *alludes to the ecstatic vision* which was given to the martyrs in the days of their torments, and at the hour when they gave up their ghost.”<sup>100</sup> Most trenchantly, historian Gedaliah Alon remarks that “I do not think this homily can be assigned to the time of the Hadrianic persecution following the Bar Kokhba War. This was scarcely a time to arouse ‘envy’ of the Jews among the pagans. Apart from that, we have no quotations from Rabbi Akiva for the post-Revolt period, even though we do have a story about a communication from him in prison before his execution by the Romans. It seems more

99. Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Exposition of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 250, emphasis added.

100. Baer, “Israel and the Church,” 82.

likely that the present passage echoes memories of the days following the Destruction of the Temple, or of the ‘War of Quietus’. I would opt for the latter possibility here.”<sup>101</sup> Now, if we were to take seriously these historical judgments, then, of course, Bowersock’s argument would simply, positivistically, be wrong, because the martyrdom of the “real” Rabbi Akiva was earlier than that of Polycarp, the first of the new Christian martyrs. However, Alon’s very embarrassment in looking for a moment in which Jews are being persecuted en masse and also so-called pagans wish to convert in numbers is indicative of the difficulty of this approach to reading the text. The final act of historiographical desperation was, it seems, committed by Moshe David Herr, who writes of this passage, “The remarks must have been made just before the Bar Kokhba rebellion and the subsequent decrees of persecutions. After the rebellion, it would no longer have been possible for gentiles to observe: ‘You are pleasing, you are mighty . . .’ On the contrary, . . . the failure of the rebellion was interpreted as the failure of Judaism and its God. As a result, mass proselytizing activity ceased. The mention of dying and killing does not refer to suffering the penalty of death for *Kiddush Hashem*—to sanctify God’s name, but to all persons who accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>102</sup> Herr’s necessity to distort the meaning of “for him you are being killed all the day” into a form of “white martyrdom” speaks as loudly as a trumpet. In my view, Alon, Herr, and all of the other historians are looking in the wrong place for a historical context for this text as long as they are looking at the lifetime of Rabbi Akiva and seeking there historical persecutions and mass conversions of pagans.

I find it much more plausible to assume that “the nations of the world” in Rabbi Akiva’s midrash refers to Christians and not to pagans at all. The context is not the early second century and the life of Rabbi Akiva, but the third when the text was probably produced, and Rabbi Akiva is an icon here. This is not to say that the matter was invented then out of whole cloth; Christian martyrology may very well have entered Jewish consciousness as early as the late-second century, but this midrash probably found its form at this time, a time of massive persecution of Christians and development of Christian martyrology. Alternatively, we might find here, as it were, a partial rejoinder on the part of a Jewish text

101. Alon, *Jews in Their Land*, 523–24. The “War of Quietus,” or “Qitus” in rabbinic sources refers to a minor Jewish revolt under Trajan, E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 421–27. See also Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 105.

102. Herr, “Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian’s Days,” 92.

to the claims of a Justin Martyr, both in his disputation and in his death. This text is part of a contestation over martyrdom—Whose martyrdom is this anyway?—not about pagans who wanted to convert in spite of martyrdom. This makes much more sense of the ending of the text as well. However ambivalent rabbinic Jews have been over proselytism and conversion to Judaism, there is little evidence, if any, that at any time were sincere converts completely rejected on the grounds that God is exclusively the lover of Israel according to the flesh. However, if the Gentile Christians are claiming that they have a part in him, owing to their experience of martyrdom, then it makes sense—but not inevitably so, see below—that a late antique rabbinic Jewish text might respond: This martyrdom and the experience of divine favor and love that it brings is only for Jews. Martyrdom was taken as a sign of divine grace and favor, and both rabbinic Jews and Christians “contend for the crown.”<sup>103</sup>

#### MARTYRDOM AND ROME?

I accept then Bowersock’s claim that “the alleged martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva in the second century [is] a retrospective construction of a posterior age, an age substantially later than that of the first Christian martyrdoms.”<sup>104</sup> My vigorous dissent from Bowersock’s position is this: Where Bowersock projects virtually independent religious communities of Jews and Christians as early as the time of the first martyrs, everything I have said up until now suggests strongly a history of cultural interchange.

If, then, on the one hand, I do not accept naive and positivistic accounts of Jewish martyrdom as having been the source and influence

103. This picture is considerably less irenic than the one painted by Lieberman, for which see below. There is no contradiction necessary, of course, as different texts may have different positions. This explanation is, to my mind, a much more plausible one also to explain the other texts that Baer cites in his paper than his highly questionable hypothesis that Jews were included in the Decian persecutions. For the weakness of the latter, see Lieberman, “Persecution,” 235. Herr also understands that “the Sages living and the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century C.E. gave a deeper justification to the ideological basis of the concept of martyrology,” but doesn’t seem to be able to explain why, in spite of the fact that Lieberman had suggested the answer many years previously.

104. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 9–10. Cf. also Shemuel Safrai, “Martyrdom in the Teachings of the Tannaim,” in *Sjaloom*, eds. T. C. de Kruijf and H. v. d. Sandt (Arnhem, 1983), 145–64 and J. W. van Henten, ed., *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989).

upon Christians,<sup>105</sup> neither will I adopt Bowersock's reversed model. Indeed, the very example that he cites, the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons of IV Maccabees was, I would propose, produced in the same religious atmosphere, the same religious environment, in which figures such as Ignatius and Polycarp lived and breathed, as well (and perhaps even the martyrs of Lyons).<sup>106</sup> Thus, Bowersock confidently presumes that "[i]f the two stories in the books of the Maccabees have nothing to do either with the authentic history of the Maccabees or with the lost original text that recounted it, it may be suggested that they have everything to do with the aspirations and literature of the early Christians."<sup>107</sup> Absolutely, but they have everything to do with the aspirations and literature of contemporary Jews as well—how could they not?—and this hardly constitutes an argument that Christian "martyrdom had nothing to do with Judaism or with Palestine. It had everything to do with the Graeco-Roman world, its traditions, its language, and its cultural tastes." As Bowersock himself has noted, "When it was written IV Macc. reflected Hellenistic Judaism but hardly Christianity."<sup>108</sup> Indeed, for the first- (or even second-) century milieu in which IV Maccabees was produced,<sup>109</sup> the whole distinction makes no sense whatever, any more than would the question of whether James or Peter is a Jew or a Christian. The prodigious similarities between the ethos (and phraseology) of this text and Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans*, the *Martyrium Polycarpi*, and the Letter of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne have often been remarked.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, we must remember as well that through the third century and the early fourth, when Christians were being persecuted and killed, Jews were generally not,<sup>111</sup> and in this sense, then, Bowersock's point holds. It was most plausibly within circles

105. Pace Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 22. Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 7. But see above, n. 51.

106. See below, n. 110.

107. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 13.

108. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 79.

109. Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 75–78.

110. Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 77. See William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 53, 64; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 198–99; Othmar Perler, "Das vierter Makkabäerbuch: Ignatius von Antiochien und die ältesten Märtyrerberichte," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 25 (1949): 47–72.

111. This is the whole point of Lieberman, "Persecution," strongly countering the very hypothetical and ideologically driven arguments of Baer, "Israel and the Church."

in which persecutions were more current memories that martyrology developed, spreading as well to other circles and subgroups of the Judeo-Christian cultural system, including, notably, the Rabbis as a mode of interpreting their own past of persecutions and deaths for the faith. There is, moreover, another reason why we could expect that martyrology would develop more urgently among Christians, namely, the christological impulse itself; there is no doubt that Ignatius conceived of his Christian duty as “being crucified with Christ,” and Ignatius was crucially formative for Polycarp as well.<sup>112</sup> Our very story of Rabbi Eli‘ezer, escaping martyrdom by convincing the *hegemon* that he was not Christian, demonstrates rabbinic recognition of this fact (whether or not the rest of my interpretation of that story is deemed acceptable),<sup>113</sup> and, once again, we must emphasize that this story comes from a text edited apparently right in the midst of the Decian persecutions, or soon thereafter. The cultural materials of which martyrdom was made were hardly, however, entirely from outside of the Jewish cultural context, both diachronic and synchronic, and in this sense, I differ from Bowersock’s depiction.

Martyrdom as a discourse was shared (and fought over) between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity as these two complexly intertwined religions and social formations were approaching their definitive schism in Eusebius’ fourth century. Once again the area of doubt is not as to whether the events of either “martyr’s” death were more or less as described in the text, but precisely the details of textualization of those deaths that are most susceptible to alteration as a discourse develops and is transfigured.<sup>114</sup> It is crucial that we take seriously the notion that, while there have always been deaths under oppression, the interpretation and reinterpretation of these deaths as martyrdom is a specific discourse and one that seems to belong much more (speaking conservatively) to Late Antiquity than to the Hellenistic period. The deaths of the Maccabees, the death of Rabbi Akiva, and some early Christian deaths as well, only became martyrdoms at a later moment in discourse, and it is absolutely stunning how similar in tone the descriptions of Rabbi Akiva’s and Polycarp’s martyrdoms are. In both, the proconsul speaks to the aged

112. As emphasized to me by Harry Maier.

113. See chapter one of Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God*.

114. Here the comparison between II Maccabees and IV Maccabees can be taken as exemplary. As van Henten remarks: “Differences like these can best be understood as adaptations of the source material from 2 Maccabees by the author of 4 Maccabees to adjust it to the discourse and the socio-cultural context of the primary readers,” Jan Willem van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 72.

sage with respect and concern, and in both the candidate for martyrdom is unwavering in exactly the same melody, even if the lyrics vary slightly. In other respects, the martyrologies of Rabbi Akiva are even more similar to a text like the *Acts of Carpus*.<sup>115</sup> Being killed is an event; martyrdom is a literary form, a genre, a discourse, by which I surely do not mean that it belongs only to “high” culture or does not have significance in the lived world, but rather that it is a form of collective story in the sense that Michelle Rosaldo has elaborated the term: “We come to know [a culture] through collective stories that suggest the nature of coherence, probability and sense within the actor’s world.”<sup>116</sup> Such “collective stories” have enormous impact on social practice and on the molding of subjectivities; they are, in the strict sense, praxis.

What were the “collective stories” of deaths that were being told in the rabbinic and Christian worlds of the first, second, third, and fourth centuries, and how did they vary over this time, to the extent that we can learn this? I believe that they vary, in fact, in ways that are remarkably similar. These actors shared, I suggest, a common, or, at least, an overlapping cultural world.

This avenue of thought would account for the patent close connections between the Maccabean texts and the Eusebian letter of the martyrs of Lyons, or the letters of Ignatius, both of which Frend has demonstrated so compellingly.<sup>117</sup> There are also very “striking parallels [of the prayer of Polycarp] with 4 Macc 6, 27–29 (the prayer of Eleasar).”<sup>118</sup> Our best evidence seems, therefore, to suggest a complexly imbricated origin for this discourse in the second, third, and even fourth centuries, in which Greek-speaking Jews, Jewish Christians, Roman Christians, and rabbinic Jews—and their collective cultural traditions: chaste Greek and Roman

115. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 289.

116. Michelle Rosaldo, “Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling,” in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotions*, eds. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 140.

117. For the former, Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 19–20; the latter, Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 198–99. See also Perler, “Makkabäerbuch”; Jan Willem van Henten, “Datierung und Herkunft des vierten Makkabäerbuches,” in *Tradition and Reinterpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Jürgen C. H. Lebram*, eds. J. W. van Henten, H. J. de Jonge, *Studia Post-Biblica* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 136–49. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 77–81, who considers IV Maccabees a later text, following van Henten, denies the Ignatian affiliations, but does argue for a common source in Asia Minor for the language of both texts.

118. Dehandschutter, “Martyrium Polycarpi,” 507–8.

wives threatened with rape,<sup>119</sup> Maccabees, gladiators, Socrates, Jesus on the Cross, even Carthaginian child sacrifice<sup>120</sup>—had a hand in different ways and to different degrees.<sup>121</sup> The “invention” of martyrdom, far from being evidence for Christian influence on Judaism or the opposite, is most plausibly read as evidence for the close contact and the impossibility of drawing sharp and absolute distinctions between these communities or their discourses throughout this period.<sup>122</sup>

119. Burrus, “Reading Agnes,” 38–43. This is an elegant example of the extreme care and delicacy required for working out the details of the intertextual production of such a complex cultural practice as martyrology, for, on the one hand, as Burrus shows, following Loraux, the place of death, neck rather than breast, is determined by Greek tragedy as a subjugating, female death. On the other hand, for defeated gladiators, the death by the neck was an honorable death, through which the feminized, defeated gladiator recovered his masculine honor, Carlin A. Barton, “Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr,” *Representations* 45.4 (1994): 41–71, so that one could conceivably read the death of the female martyrs as a paradoxically virilizing death, in that it affords them the stature of the honorable (and thus paradoxically victorious) gladiator. However, as Burrus shows, it is precisely in the details of the intertextual allusions that the interpretation lies, and in this case, it is the fact of the choice offered of the breast or the neck and the chosen neck that marks the death as belonging to the tragic Polyxena and not Roman gladiator typos. But this is precisely, as well, a case study in the overdetermination of this, most complex, nuanced, and fascinating of cultural praxes (the word is chosen advisedly).

120. Joyce Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50–55.

121. “Imbricated” here seems precisely the right word. Like the tiles on a roof, these discourses and practices were overlaid on each other in partly overlapping manner.

122. Truth to tell, Bowersock seems to involve himself in virtual self-contradiction on occasion. Thus in the space of one paragraph, he writes: “In these early years of the second century, in both the polytheist and Christian contexts and also, I suspect (on the basis of my interpretation of Second Maccabees), the Palestinian Jewish context, the concept of martyrdom as we know it gradually took shape,” and then, “One cannot help wondering therefore whether or not this invention of martyrdom had some kind of root in western Asia Minor, that is to say Anatolia,” Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 17. I far prefer, for obvious reasons, his first suggestion. Bowersock, in contrast, seems intensely committed to his second one. On the other hand, I could not disagree more with Frend’s conclusion that “[t]he problem which the Christians posed to the Empire was fundamentally the same as that posed by Judaism,” Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 22. Judaism was assimilable to the system of ancestral cults while Christianity was not. As Lieberman demonstrated brilliantly in his Hebrew essay, “Persecution,” 234–45, there is no evidence whatsoever for persecution of the Jewish religion at the time of the Decian or Diocletian persecutions of Christians, and even the persecutions of the time of Hadrian, which provided the Rabbis with some claims on the crown of martyrdom, had more to do with politics than religion.

I would suggest the following tentative model for thinking about the historical processes of cultural interaction which issued in the full-fledged martyrological literature of both late antique Judaism and Christianity. The earliest “Jewish” and “Christian” sources for martyrdom are, as has been pointed out, very similar in their milieux and structure. Both IV Maccabees and the earliest contemporary Christian martyr texts draw heavily on the earliest Jewish rudimentary martyrologies of the pre-Christian II Maccabees. Moreover, there are important similarities between IV Maccabees itself and early Christian martyrologies which suggest shared innovation.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, as Judith Lieu has sensitively argued and shown, early Jewish martyr texts and the *Martyrium Polycarpi* both make heavy usage of the Sacrifice of Isaac and midrashic connections to the Passover in their imagery. As she writes: “The most cautious assessment would conclude that rather than the Christian use of the story being adopted from and used in polemic against a fully fledged earlier Jewish doctrine, the two developed in some form of interaction with each other, probably during the second century. At some stage in this development the Isaac story became associated with the Passover, an association we find in the Targums and also in Melito, but again it is a matter of debate how far this was a Jewish response to Christian understanding of the death of Jesus, whose Passover links were fixed, rather than part of its inspiration. It was a dialogue which was to continue; rabbinic elaboration of the tradition becomes increasingly detailed with surprising echoes of Christian ideas, while Christian authors also used the story in their own interests, as when Apollinarus describes Jesus as the true Pascha, ‘the bound one who bound the strong’ (cf. Mt 12.29).”<sup>124</sup>

Others of the specific differanda of late antique martyrdom grew up most naturally in the Christian milieu in the third and early fourth

123. Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 80, following in part U. Kellerman, “Das Danielbuch und die Martyrtheologie der Auferstehung,” in *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie*, ed. J. W. van Henten (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 51–75.

124. Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 78–79. Lieu goes on to remark: “Chilton and Davies, whose position is here in part adopted, see this interaction as polemical, a stance inevitably conveyed by the literature. Other evidence of continuing influence on Christians of Jewish exegetical traditions—and why should not the process have also been reversed?—suggests that it may sometimes have been less explicitly so.” The reference is to P. R. Davies and Bruce Chilton, “The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 514–46. Similarly, Yuval, “Haggadah,” in his excellent article on very similar themes, tends to lean exclusively on the model of a polemical interaction rather than considering the possibility of shared and diffused exegetical traditions as well. Cf. Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 165.



centuries, during the Decian and Great Persecutions. Since most of the persecutions, if not virtually all, in the third century were of Christians and not of Jews, martyrology naturally transfigured and evolved in that century primarily within Christian circles, adapting and adopting various cultural elements from within the worlds of the martyrs and the martyrologists, in particular the aforesaid tragic and gladiatorial motifs.<sup>125</sup> In addition, another momentous element seems to have been added to the mix at some time, namely “the authentic [*sic*] documentation of the legal hearing.”<sup>126</sup> These themes, narratological and theological, were then recycled back into Talmudic texts as a way of narrativizing and grasping the deaths of the persecuted Jews of the second century under Hadrian and ultimately, fascinatingly enough, the original Maccabean death stories were rethematized along these lines as well.<sup>127</sup> Bowersock is simply wrong in his assumption that the Talmudic texts manifest a “complete lack of interrogation procedures.”<sup>128</sup> All of the Talmudic texts about martyrdom, whether Rabbi Eliezer’s and Rabbi El’azar’s escapes from martyrdom, or Rabbi Akiva’s and Rabbi Ḥanina’s martyrologies, manifest this element of the interrogation.<sup>129</sup> This allows for a complicated, nuanced, historical account of how Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultural elements became creatively combined into late antique martyrology. We must think of circulation and recirculating motifs, themes, religious ideas in the making of martyrdom, a recirculation

125. Although this element is present already in the earliest form of Christian era Jewish martyr-texts, IV Maccabees, as well as in Polycarp, and Lieu has already read it as manifesting “a shared thought-world perhaps in the same geographical area,” Lieu, *Image & Reality*, 81. Lieu’s work is remarkable for its sensitivity and the complexity and nuance of the historical models of Jewish/Christian cultural interaction that it develops. On this theme in Jewish literature, see also Joshua Levinson, “Bloody Fictions,” in Hebrew, *Tarbiz*.

126. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 27, citing den Boeft who wrote (or rather said): “In den christlichen Martyrien bildet trotz aller Verschiedenheit der Formen bei den authentischen Dokumenten das Prozessverfahren den Kern. Vielleicht liegt darin der Unterschied zu den jüdischen Martyrien, sodass dadurch auch der Begriff *μάρτυς* als typisch christlicher Titel zu verstehen wäre,” Johannes van der Klaauw, “Diskussion: Das Phänomen des Martyriums: Versuch einer Definition,” in *Die Entstehung der Jüdischen Martyrologie*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten, *Studia Post-Biblica* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 221. Bowersock makes much of this vaunted “authenticity,” accepting even the highly contested acts of Pionius as if they were straightforward documentation of “the society of second and third-century Smyrna,” Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 30.

127. Doran, “The Martyr.”

128. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 37.

129. Lieberman, “Roman Legal Institutions.”

between Christians and Jews that allows for no simple litany of origins and influence.<sup>130</sup>

On the other hand, the question of actual chronologies is rather important here, too. It is generally accepted among church historians today that such texts as, at least, the *Martyrium Polycarpi*,<sup>131</sup> the acts of the Scillitan martyrs (of 180), and the letter of the churches of Lyons and Vienne were produced very close to the time of the events in question, if not by actual eyewitnesses. It is important for me to emphasize that the question that I am raising is not one of historical “authenticity,” but of the histories of discourses. Another way of putting this question would be: In the second century when Jews and Christians were both being killed by the Romans, i.e., Akiva and Polycarp (within approximately two decades of each other), what were the stories that Rabbis were telling of Akiva’s death, that Christians were telling of Polycarp’s? I would suggest that we have one precious piece of evidence that Rabbis were telling, in fact, a very different story at the early period. Just before Rabbi Akiva’s death, we are told, two other figures, a certain Rabbi Shim’on and a certain Rabbi ’Ishma’el were executed by the Romans. These former beseeches the latter: “My heart goes out to know why I am being killed”—a theological question. Lieberman argues that they must not have been killed for teaching Torah, for if they had been, they would have known that they were performing the great *mitzva* of being martyred, so, therefore, they must have been caught as simple revolutionaries.<sup>132</sup> This argument can be subtly shifted, however, if we assume that it was only through the *acta* of Rabbi Akiva himself that the concept of martyrdom as a *mitzva* entered the rabbinic world. These earlier ones (including the Rabbi Akiva of the second century, as it were) might very well have been killed for the performance of Torah, and still not have had a sense of the ecstatic privilege that this death conferred. If certainly not the only way, one fashion that this Jewish text can be read, then, is as confirming Bowersock’s insight that “martyrdom was not something that the ancient world had seen from the beginning. What we can observe in the second, third, and fourth centuries of our era is something

130. Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet,” 269, who writes: “The political and spiritual situation in the Roman Empire made it thus possible that literary and legendary motifs and theological or philosophical beliefs could travel from one religion to the other. The identification of the prophet with the martyr, found in Jewish, Christian and, to a lesser degree in Hellenistic sources would seem to bear this out.”

131. Boudewijn Dehandschutter, “Le Martyre de Polycarpe et le développement de la conception du martyr au deuxième siècle,” *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982): 659–68.

132. Lieberman, “Persecution,” 227–28.

entirely new.” “I did not know,” says the Rabbi Akiva of the Palestinian Talmud. In the later Babylonian Talmudic version quoted earlier he already knew from before what it was he had to do, and was just waiting for the opportunity.

The constituent of the “something new” that is encapsulated in the axis of the declaration of the *nomen, Christianus sum*, and its crucial role in the development of the *martyria* would seemingly be a Christian product of the second century. It is present and central in all of the martyr acts accepted by the consensus of scholars as authentic and pre-Decian. We find it in the martyrdom of Polycarp, in the letter of Lyons and Vienne,<sup>133</sup> and in North African martyrology of 180, the martyrs of Scilli.<sup>134</sup> This distribution and this consistency suggest an element of martyrology that had firmly taken root in the earliest Christian traditions of martyrdom itself. On the other hand, in the Jewish texts we have no such invariability for this principle. Indeed, if the discourse of provoked martyrdom (a better term, in my opinion, than “voluntary” martyrdom; if martyrdom is not voluntary, it is not martyrdom) is a particularly striking innovation among the Rabbis, it is most easy to explain the irony and near mockery that we find in the parallel martyrology to that of Rabbi Akiva of Rabbi Ḥanina from Tractate ‘Avoda Zara 17b.<sup>135</sup> When the good Rabbi engages, like Rabbi ‘Akiva, in the provocative public teaching of Torah, Rabbi Yose ben Kisma challenges him, to which Rabbi Ḥanina replies, “From heaven they will have mercy,” which

133. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 142.

134. J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337* (London: SPCK, 1960), 42.

135. In a very stimulating, but finally not entirely convincing (to me), reading of TB Sanhedrin 74a–75b and parallels, Aryeh Cohen has argued that “[t]he sanctification of God’s name, as constructed in this *sugya*, is only passive. Not engaging in adultery (=idolatry) is *kiddush hashem*. There is no way of active *kiddush hashem* since the sanctifier is constructed as Esther is—if he has no pleasure he has sanctified God’s name. If he is like ‘natural soil’ he resists the impurity of idolatry/adultery. The idea of an active sanctification of God’s name is foreign, since that pleasure (of actively sanctifying God’s name), like the pleasure of sexual intercourse, is given only to transgressors,” Aryeh Cohen, “Towards an Erotics of Martyrdom,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998): 249. If Cohen be right in his reading, that Talmudic text would stand in direct opposition to the line of thought that is developed in the Rabbi Akiva texts, an opposition much more implacable and univocal than that in our *Avoda Zara* intertext. This, by itself, of course, would be an entirely plausible result. Cohen’s reading hangs, however, on the assumption that, according to one voice there, Esther managed to resist successfully Aḥašuerōš’s attempts to have intercourse with her, and it is this crucial moment in his reading that fails to produce conviction.

occasions Rabbi Yose's sardonic: "I say logical things to you, and you answer me: 'From Heaven they will have mercy!' I will be surprised if they do not burn you and the Scroll of the Torah with you." In this martyrdom of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Tradyon, we do not find the identification with the "Name" at all. In its stead, we find there in answer to the question of the judge, "Why do you teach Torah," "because so my God has commanded me." Moreover, in the Talmudic versions of the story of the martyrdom of the woman and her seven sons, only one of the sons quotes the verse "Hear O Israel," while all the others quote other verses entirely; nor is the quotation of the "Hear O Israel" at a particularly marked point in the story above the others.<sup>136</sup> It seems then reasonable to assume that the Unification of the Name, brought to the fore in the latter-day narratives of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva—if indeed, as I have suggested, it is a functional parallel to the *Christianus sum* of the Christian martyrs—is probably to be seen as a rabbinic "answer" to that crucial declaration of the *nomen*, that "public identification with the Christian name [which] is the last word, followed by death." And it is this which becomes the definitive moment in Jewish martyrology in the post-Talmudic period. There is, moreover, something perhaps peculiarly Roman in this particular enactment of a "moment of truth." Peculiarly Roman perhaps also, in these early martyrologies, is the occasional theme of "being a man," found both in Polycarp and Perpetua.<sup>137</sup> So far, so Bowersock.

However, when we look at the other, to my mind, equally significant development of late-ancient martyrologies, namely, the eroticization and mysticization of the martyr's death, the picture shifts considerably. First of all, as has been shown, the element of the martyr's special vision at the

136. *Lamentations Rabba* 1 and Babylonian Talmud 57b. Each of the martyred children cites a verse, and the "Hear O Israel," later the sine qua non of martyrdom, right up until the Nazi genocide, is the fifth out of the seven, suggesting that the particular usage of the Unification of the Name had not yet formed at the time of the midrash. This point was made to me by Galit Hasan-Rokem. For detailed discussion of the text, see Doran, "The Martyr," 191–92.

137. Carlin A. Barton, "The 'Moment of Truth' in Ancient Rome: Honor and Embodiment in a Contest Culture," unpublished essay (Berkeley, 1995). Barton makes clear there, as well, that "virtus," being a man, was as much for women as for men. For the ways that this theme of manliness is reflected in rabbinic literature, see Michael L. Satlow, "'Try to Be a Man': The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity," *HTR* 89 (1996): 19–40. Nor am I arguing for its absence, but rather that it was a highly contested motif in rabbinic literature, particularly at certain crucial junctures like this one of standing up and being killed, "like a man," which Polycarp is urged to do by a heavenly voice.

moment of death is an older Jewish motif inherited by both rabbinic and Christian late-ancient martyrologies.<sup>138</sup> But even more pointedly, as Burrus and Castelli have shown, the powerful eroticization of Christian martyrology is a product of the fourth century; it is absent in the second-century martyrdoms, even of women.<sup>139</sup> The fourth-century virgin martyrs are ecstatically ravished, not victorious combatants, at the moment of “completion.” This motif, however, is eminently present and central in martyrological texts associated with Rabbi Akiva as early as our Mekhilta, at least, a text very likely contemporaneous with the Decian persecutions and made central via the interpretation of martyrdom as fulfillment of the commandment to “love God with all one’s soul.” Here, then, is a central motif of late-ancient Christian and rabbinic martyrology of which it can certainly *not* be said, with Bowersock, that it had “nothing to do with Judaism or with Palestine.” The eroticization of martyrdom may have first appeared among the Rabbis or perhaps it didn’t, but that is, in any case, precisely my point, which is to emphasize the permeability, the fuzziness of these very borderlines.

The story of Rabbi Eli‘ezer with which we entered this inquiry enacts itself the terms of my suggestion. On the one hand the story admits, as it were, that Christian martyrdoms began earlier than those of the Jews, since Judaism was at first *religio licita*, while Christianity was *superstitio*.<sup>140</sup> Rabbi Eli‘ezer escapes from being martyred by establishing, however

138. Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet.”

139. Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.1 (1994): 27–51; Burrus, “Reading Agnes”; Elizabeth Castelli, “Imperial Reimaginings of Christian Origins: Epic in Prudentius’s Poem,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, eds. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 173–84.

140. In his essay, Lieberman explained the persecutions of the Jewish religion under Hadrian in the following convincing manner. First, the Jews were forbidden to circumcise, not as an attack on Judaism but as part of the general Roman law against genital mutilation, the *lex Cornelia de sicariis*. This led to Jewish revolt, which led, in turn, to harsh Roman response, but there was never, according to him, a concerted attack on the Jewish religion by the Roman government, Lieberman, “Persecution,” 214, and see his classic, “Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries,” in *Texts and Studies* (1946; reprint, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 112–77, in which he demonstrated that the notion of persecution of the Jewish religion in the third and fourth centuries in Palestine is nothing other than a pure scholarly myth. Indeed, there is evidence that Jews invited Gentile(!) Christians to become Jews in order to avoid persecution. Lieberman argued compellingly that the Romans never forbade the practice of Judaism per se but always only interdicted particular practices that otherwise interfered with Roman legal institutions. There was, therefore, never a

trickily, that he is not a Christian. But, on the other hand, if my reading of this story is not pure fantasy, the text is also suggesting that indeed Rabbi Eli'ezer, again one of the central, if problematic, heroes of the Pharisees, and later of the Rabbis, could indeed have legitimately suffered martyrdom as a Christian.<sup>141</sup>

The point is even clearer in the Talmudic version of the story, which details the precise controversy between Rabbi Eli'ezer and the Christian:

When he came to his house, his disciples came to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. Rabbi Akiva said to him: "Allow me to say to you one of the things that you have taught me" [an honorific euphemism for the student teaching the teacher]. He said to him: "Say!" He said to him: "Rabbi, perhaps you heard a Christian word, and it gave you pleasure, and because of that you were arrested for sectarianism." He said: "By heaven, you have reminded me. Once I was walking in the upper market of Sephorris, and one of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene, a man by the name of Jacob of Kefar Sekania, met up with me.<sup>142</sup> He said to me, 'It is written in your Torah: "Do not bring the wages of a prostitute or the proceeds of a dog [to the house of your Lord]" (Dt 23.19). What about using them to build a latrine for the High Priest?' And I said nothing to him. And he told me that

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crime involved in simply being a Jew, as there was in being a Christian. In both of the cases of Jewish martyrdom that we have read in this essay, it was provocative teaching of Torah in public, understood as a potentially seditious activity (the production of the site for a "hidden transcript") that brought on the wrath of the Romans, and this even according to our half-legendary sources, Lieberman, "Persecution," 217. This interpretation is echoed in Frend's clear definition that "Roman religion was a therefore less a matter of personal devotion than of national cult. Rome judged the religion of others from the same standpoint. 'Every people, Laelius, has its religion, and we have ours.' A *religio* was *licita* for a particular group on the basis of tribe or nationality and traditional practices, coupled with the proviso that its rites were not offensive to the Roman people or its gods," Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 106. That last proviso is, of course, vitally significant, and it is this, the particular offensiveness of individual practices, that explains the Hadrianic persecution which was not, as Lieberman has demonstrated, an attempt at extirpation of the Jewish religion, *contra* Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 227.

141. And this text even fits the technical definition of a martyr act in that "the kernel is the authentic documentation of the legal hearing," Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 27, referring to J. W. den Boeft in J. W. van Henten, *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie*, 221. *Pace* Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 37. See also above, p. 617.

142. In the midrash version, we find here, as in the Tosefta: "and he said a word of sectarianism in the name of Yeshu' the son of Pantiri, and it caused me pleasure," and then the addition, "and this is what the matter was . . ." As Rokeah already noted, we have a clear sign of a later addition in the text, which the Talmud's version has smoothed over, Rokeah, "Ben Stara," 9, and see also Hirshman, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*, 1:55.

thus had taught Jesus his teacher: “It was gathered from the wages of a prostitute, and to the wages of a prostitute it will return [Mic 1.7]”—it comes from a place of filth, and to a place of filth it will return’ [i.e., for building a latrine one may use the proceeds of a prostitute], and the matter gave me pleasure, and for that I was arrested for sectarianism, since I had violated that which is written: Keep her ways far away from you!” [Prov 5.8]. (Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 17a, MS Rabbinowitz 15, JTSA)

Rabbi Eli‘ezer is inconsolable, not because he has had to used tricksterism to escape being martyred, but because he was arrested at all, as the continuation makes clear. The strongest clue to the meaning of this narrative is the fictional character and apparent arbitrariness of the particular halakhic discussion between the Rabbi and the Christian, for there is no special reason why it would be this specific issue that a disciple of Jesus would raise with a Pharisee.<sup>143</sup> It is obvious, moreover, that this conversation is the work of the later editor,<sup>144</sup> since it is absent in the earlier Tosefta, and since, moreover, it is consistent with the patterning of stories about Jesus in later texts and especially in the Babylonian Talmud that portray Jesus as a virtual “Rabbi.”<sup>145</sup> The

143. Even according to David Flusser, *Judaism and the Sources of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 60–61, the relevant parallels only appear in the Gospel of John and thus hardly constitute evidence that such a conversation could actually have taken place between a direct disciple of Jesus and a Pharisee. As Flusser brilliantly remarks, “This formulation testifies apparently to parallel linguistic/ conceptual development in the understanding of Christianity on the part of the Sages, on the one hand, and that of the Gospel of John’s understanding of the relation of Christianity to Judaism, on the other.” I quite agree with Hirshman, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*, 1:56, that the group that produced that Gospel might very well have put such a midrash in the mouth of their Jesus, *pace* Rokeah, “Ben Stara,” 12.

144. See above, n. 142.

145. Richard Kalmin, “Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity,” *HTR* 87 (1994): 156. This is patently the case, because in the parallel text, which is otherwise identical in every respect with the version in the Babylonian Talmud, the specifics of the conversation between R. Eli‘ezer and the Christian are not given, but only that “he said something heretical to me and I enjoyed it.” The point that the only flaw in Jesus’s Torah is its origin (the only thing wrong with Christianity is that it is not Judaism—to mime E. P. Sanders’s famous pronouncement on Paul) is exclusive to the later texts and not to the early Palestinian source, Tosefta Hullin 2.24. It is not necessarily Babylonian in origin, however, since it is found in the (relatively) late (fourth-century) Palestinian midrash on Ecclesiastes, Hirshman, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*, 2:52–58. See Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30–150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 159, who clearly gets the point that the Torah of the Christian is very similar to rabbinic Torah, and the only thing wrong with it is its origin. Cf. Philip L. Culbertson, *A Word Fitly Spoken: Contest, Transmission, and Adoption of the Parables of Jesus*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 55–61, who goes so far as to consider

choice of an interlocution having to do with prostitution and the Temple must be laid at the door of the Talmudic “author” of this legend, and its significance sought within the context of Jewish culture in general and of this Talmudic passage in specific.<sup>146</sup> Although some scholars have seen in this discussion about latrines and prostitutes that is placed here in the mouth of Jesus an attempt at mockery of Jesus and his followers, I do not think that such an interpretation is necessary or even warranted. As pointed out by the traditional Talmudic commentators, the question is a serious one. There was a need for a latrine for the High Priest in the Temple, as part of the ritual of his preparation for the service on Yom Kippur, and the question of whether the prostitute’s hire could be used as alms for this nonholy of purposes would be an entirely appropriate question within the canons of halakhic discourse.

The Christian proposes a lenient reading of the verse that prohibits the taking of the earnings of a prostitute to the Temple, namely, that although such earnings are forbidden for holy purposes, for mundane and even lowly purposes like the building of a toilet for the High Priest, they are permitted. A typical midrashic justification for this conclusion is proposed by the Christian as well. Rabbi Eli‘ezer “enjoys” this utterance, perhaps, for two reasons. First of all, there is the sheer intellectual pleasure of a clever midrashic reading, one that, I emphasize, is in method identical to “kosher” midrash;<sup>147</sup> and second, the result of this midrash would be increased funding for the Temple. The Rabbi is, however, punished for this enjoyment by the humiliation and fright of being arrested by the Romans for being a Christian, which he just barely escapes. The analogy seems clear: Just as one may not take the hire of a prostitute for any purpose connected with holiness, so one may not take the “Torah” of a heretic for any purpose connected with holiness. Although the substance of the words of Torah seems identical—just as

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this a possible lost teaching of Jesus. Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 76–80, certainly demonstrates the “authenticity” of the details of the trial, as portrayed in the Tosefta, but nothing that he says would indicate the ascription of any historicity to the midrashic dialogue between R. Eli‘ezer and Ya‘qov, nor to the midrash of Jesus as a “lost saying.” I fail to understand why Culbertson claims that Jacob Neusner, *Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 199 and 366, “repeatedly misses the point.” Neusner’s reading seems to me very close to being on target. Cf. also R. J. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 106–21.

146. Rokeah, “Ben Stara,” 12, is of this opinion as well.

147. “It is difficult to see why this ‘halakhic midrash’ is referred to as a ‘sectarianism saying,’” Rokeah, “Ben Stara,” 12.



the money itself is identical—the source in “impurity” renders them unfit for holiness and punishable their acceptance. Sectarianism is homologous with prostitution—as also frequently enough in early Christian writings as well. Moreover, the seductiveness of the heretical interpretation matches formally what its content encodes as well, for there, also, the temptation is to make use for holy purposes of that which originates in impurity, the harlot’s wage. When Rabbi Eli‘ezer indicts himself for having violated the precept to “Keep her ways far away from you!” both of these moments are comprehended.

At one and the same time, the story both concedes Bowersock’s point, as it were, and contests his model. Through its very negation—Rabbi Eli‘ezer enjoyed the Torah of Jesus but repented that enjoyment—the Rabbis are revealing their understanding that not only is there contact between rabbinic Jews and Christians throughout their period but that this contact results in religious fecundity in both directions. There is Torah to be learned from them, and although we insist that we shouldn’t, that their coin is “a whore’s wages,” nevertheless, we recognize that the coin of their Torah has value and gives us pleasure. Such, I would suggest, can be said as well of the discourse of martyrdom, as it was reconfigured in the early part of Late Antiquity. A discourse highly contested by some of the rabbinic tradition, it was nevertheless enthusiastically adopted by formidable parties within that very tradition, together with the early Christians for whom it became, of course, a centrally valorized practice.

I don’t want to be misunderstood, however, as proposing simply something that we might be tempted to call “syncretism,” as if some “ingredients” of a religion can be assigned to one “source of influence” and others to another, even a bidirectional syncretism. This model would still assume discrete and separated sects, as it were, of Rabbis and Christians. Rather, if we are talking about one complex sociocultural group with subgroups, then in addition to competition and polemic or dialogue, even the partial identification of rabbinic Jews with their Christian brothers and sisters being martyred is plausible. Lieberman has pointed to such an occurrence in the case of the martyrs of Lydda, where the Jews are reported to have been moved at the sight of the suffering Christians:

But the Jews, who were always accused by the prophets for worshipping idols, stood around, seeing and hearing, while the Egyptians renounced the gods of their own fathers and confessed the God who was also the God of the Jews, and witnessed for Him whom the Jews had many times renounced. And they were the more agitated and rent in their hearts when

they heard the heralds of the governor crying out and calling the Egyptians by Hebrew names and making mention of them under the names of prophets. For the herald, when he cried out to them, called saying “Elijah,” “Isaiah,” “Jeremiah,” “Daniel,” and other similar names, which their fathers had selected from among the Hebrews, that they might call their sons by the names of prophets. And it came to pass that their deeds were in harmony with their names. And at the men and at their names, at their words and at their actions, the Jews were greatly amazed, while they themselves were despised for their wickedness and apostasy.<sup>148</sup>

The Jews felt kinship with the martyred Egyptian Christians, because the latter worshiped their God and had chosen Jewish names.<sup>149</sup> Eusebius, to be sure, renders the story one of Christian triumphalism, but at the same time reveals (somewhat grudgingly) a story of communion as well.

The Rabbis further discussed at length the merits of Gentile Christian martyrs and their guaranteed share in the future life. As Lieberman eloquently wrote, “What did the Rabbis think of the Gentile who did not avail himself of the exemption and did suffer martyrdom for His Name? All pious Gentiles were promised their share in the future life, those of them who suffered for their good deeds were especially singled out, and there can be no doubt that the pious Gentiles who suffered martyrdom for their refusal to offer sacrifices to idols were deemed deserving of one of the noblest ranks in the future world.”<sup>150</sup> In other words, Jews shared in the discourse of martyrology and its history, even when they were not being martyred, as much, one might say, as the vast majority of Christians who also were not killed. This attitude of sharing would compete with other moods in which the rabbinic texts, as our *Mekhilta*, engage precisely in constructing Jewish identity as separate from and against Christian identity, by claiming “You have no part of Him; on the contrary, ‘My beloved is mine, and I am His; I am my Beloved’s, and He is mine; He feedeth among the Lilies.’” Both of these modes of shared culture and the making of identities can be imagined as having been in

148. Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 365.

149. For a somewhat different evaluation of this passage, see Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations Between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*, trans. H. McKeating, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 408.

150. Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea,” 411. Lieberman even maintains that when Rabbi Aḥa, a Lyddan Rabbi, refers to the “martyrs of Lydda” who removed the “shame of Julian,” i.e., the shame of Jewish collaboration with a pagan, he means these very same Eusebian Christian martyrs, Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea,” 412–16.

play at the same time. This evidence suggests that, far from the complete separations implied by the usual metaphors of the “parting of the ways,” the interaction of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity throughout Late Antiquity, and perhaps indeed, forever, was as marked by convergence as by divergence, and we would do well to think, indeed, of encounters and meetings at least as much as of separations and partings.

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