Alan Segal’s rich scholarship has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in antiquity. The present article, a modest contribution to these efforts, is dedicated to his honor.

Peter Brown’s work on Christianity in late antiquity, especially his studies of the “holy man” and the “cult of relics,” revolutionized the understanding of late antique spirituality and religion.1 Although Brown himself gave comparatively little attention to Judaism,2 other scholars applied Brown’s insights to shed light on late antique Jewish sources in general and on rabbinic texts in particular.3 More recently, a few scholars have noted impressive affinities between the primary Christian texts themselves and rabbinic traditions, and a great deal has been learned from the comparative study of the two bodies

---


2 See below, n. 21 and text thereto.

of literature. In this essay I continue such scholarly efforts by analyzing two rabbinic accounts of the death and burial of the sage R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon. These accounts contain unusual, if not unprecedented, narrative elements and motifs when assessed against the background of rabbinic sources. However, the unusual elements can be understood in light of hagiographic accounts of the death and burial of Christian holy men and martyrs. In particular, aspects of the cult of relics and the practice of translation of the bones of martyrs and holy men illuminate these anomalous rabbinic narratives.

Accounts of the death and burial of R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon appear in Pesiqta de Rab Kahana 11:23 (henceforth, PRK) and Bavli Baba Meṣiʿa (hereafter abbreviated as b. B. Meṣ.) 84b. Shamma Friedman has shown that the Bavli represents a secondary development of the PRK tradition. The Bavli redactors possessed a series of stories of the life of R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon in substantially the same order and form as currently found in the PRK, and then glossed, reworked and changed the accounts for their own purposes. However, here I am not interested as much in the genesis and development of the traditions as in understanding both texts as redacted and transmitted, and therefore I will discuss the two stories as independent versions. Let me emphasize that we are not dealing with reliable historical accounts of the death of the real R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon, who lived in the second century CE, but with later (fictional) stories that should be dated to the period of the redaction of the PRK and Bavli, the sixth or seventh century CE. The text of PRK, presented first, is cited according to Mandelbaum's critical edition; that of the Bavli is cited according to the first printing (Venice, 1520.) Relevant manuscript variants of the Bavli will be noted in the discussion below.

---

7 I have filled out the abbreviations.