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The *Life of Jeremiah*

A Co-produced Window into a Jewish Cult of the Martyrs during the Early Roman Period

The Search for the Origins of Therapeutic Tomb-Pilgrimage: Co-produced Religious Notions and Co-produced Documents

The beginnings of therapeutic pilgrimage, a practice based on the understanding that the dead's intercession may trigger miraculous help for the pilgrim, are notoriously difficult to pinpoint. There is no clear-cut mention of visits to graves for this purpose before the third century CE. This elusiveness is at least partially the consequence of longstanding rejection by religious authorities. Pilgrimage to the tombs of martyrs was criticized by major Christian theologians, such as Jerome, in the fourth century.[1] It has always been contentious among rabbis, and was criticized by Maimonides in the eleventh century and beyond.[2] The debate largely stems from a major disparity in Late antique sources. These pilgrimages and their underlying beliefs are documented by a wealth of Christian material; many ended up being institutionalized as part of the cult of the saints;[3] on the other hand, earlier and contemporary Jewish allusions are few and far between.[4] The state of the documentation spawned a scholarly controversy about the origins of martyrdom. According to some, the definition of martyrdom that enabled belief in the efficacy of relics

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1 Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, XVIII. 65. 4–5; see Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*.
2 Shoham-Steiner, '"For a prayer in that place would be most welcome"', pp. 369–95.
3 The bibliography on the origins and development of the Christian cult of the saints is overabundant; among major publications, see Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*; Pietri, 'Saints et démons', pp. 17–92. See also the bibliography in Gwynn and Bangert, *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, pp. 113–15.
4 Kerkeslager, 'Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity', pp. 99–225.

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appeared simultaneously in Christianity and rabbinic Judaism during the second century CE.[5] Hellenistic and early Roman Jewish accounts of martyrdom are thus sometimes dismissed as being something else, or even as later Christian additions to the tradition.[6] On the contrary, there are historians that maintain that Christian therapeutic tomb pilgrimages were a continuation of Jewish precursor practices.[7] In the absence of a scholarly consensus about the apparition of the veneration of the martyrs, a historical phenomenon that can only be documented with certainty after it was already shared by Judaism and Christianity, the heuristic notion of co-production allows us to move beyond the often posed but unanswerable question of who influenced whom between Jews and Christians.

The adjective 'co-produced' is also useful in describing the state of several pieces of relevant documentation. Among the earliest martyrdom narratives are texts that may have been originally Jewish but are only known in Christianized versions; some may be wholly Christian compositions that utilize Jewish representations. Such is the case of the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*. This text was handed down as part of the Christian *Ascension of Isaiah*, whose text is only extant in a fourth-to-sixth-century Ethiopic translation from the Greek.[8] The story of the prophet Isaiah having been sawn in two was already circulating in Jewish circles by the second century, based on Christian testimonies by Justin and Tertullian;[9] the earliest mention of a prophet sawn to death is found in the late first-century *Epistle to the Hebrews*.[10] As André Caquot put it, 'il est difficile de délimiter le texte juif et sa rédaction chrétienne' in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*.[11] In 1995, Enrico Norelli argued that the text was an integrally Christian composition born out of a Jewish context.[12]

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5   Boyarin, *Dying for God*.

6   On II Maccabees 6. 18–7. 42, see Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*. On IV Maccabees, see Van Henten, 'Martyrdom and Persecution Revisited', pp. 59–75.

7   Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*; Wilkinson, 'Jewish Holy Places and the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage', pp. 41–53; Horbury, 'The Cult of Christ and the Cult of the Saints', pp. 444–69.

8   Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*; Tisserant, *Ascension d'Isaïe*.

9   Justin, *Against Trypho*, CXX. 5; Tertullian, *De Patientia*, 14.

10 Hebrews 11. 37. The earliest account of this episode transmitted in a Jewish source is found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Yebamot* 49a. Its earliest known iconographic depiction of this is found among the fourth–fifth-century wall paintings of the Christian funerary chapel no. 30 in El-Bagawat (Al-Kharga, Egypt).

11 Caquot, 'Martyre d'Isaïe', p. 1020; see also Caquot, 'Bref commentaire du "Martyre d'Isaïe"', pp. 65–93.

12 Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae. Commentarius*; see also Norelli, 'Interprétations nouvelles de l'Ascension d'Isaïe', pp. 11–22.

The Life of Jeremiah as a Co-produced Text

This chapter will deal with a text that raises similar questions and hypotheses about the reframing of Jewish traditions in a Christian context. The *Life of Jeremiah* (*Vita Ieramiae*) is the second paragraph of the *Lives of the Prophets* (*Vitae Prophetarum*), a Greek text that consists of twenty-three biographical entries about the Hebrew Bible's prophets, in the genre of the *Vitae* of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It details 'the[ir] names […], and where they are from, and where they died and how, and where they lie'.[13] The length of the entries varies between two and twenty-two sentences. All surviving copies of the text result from a Christian transmission, with the earliest manuscript dating from the sixth century.[14] According to Anna Maria Schwemer, who published an extensive and now authoritative commentary of the text in the late 90s, the *Lives of the Prophets* was an originally Jewish text composed in Greek in Palestine during the first century CE.[15] Most commentators agree with the Jewish origin of the composition. Among them, some have posited a Semitic original in either Hebrew or Aramaic;[16] Schwemer has, however, seriously undermined these arguments.[17]

Such texts pose various methodological challenges to scholars. For a long time, scholars have attempted to distinguish between their Jewish and Christian elements using textual parallels.[18] Indeed, when a document of this type includes a tradition (either a narrative, an interpretation, or a practice) attested by other material composed before or during the first century CE, we can identify this tradition as 'Jewish', as in 'extant in at least some Jewish circles' by this date. However, things become considerably muddier when one of the recorded traditions falls into the following categories: 1. It is only attested in non-Jewish literature but does not rely on any specific Christian theology (such as the Incarnation). 2. It is attested in Jewish literature but only later, usually in late antique rabbinic works.[19] 3. It is not otherwise documented, at least not until well into the Middle Ages. I will argue that

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13   *Life of the Prophets*, prologue. Unless mentioned otherwise, this article will refer to the edition by Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets*, pp. 21–22, and to the English translation by Hare, 'The Lives of the Prophets', pp. 386–87.

14   Hare, 'The Lives of the Prophets', p. 379.

15   Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*.

16   The conviction that any Greek Jewish text from the Hellenistic and Roman periods was necessarily translated from a Hebrew or Aramaic original was prevalent until a relatively recent date among biblical scholars. For extensive arguments, see Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets*, especially p. 52.

17   See the various rebuttals of Torrey's arguments in Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, especially p. 573 n. 3d.

18   For a recent endeavour, see Amihay, 'The Stones and the Rock', pp. 39–56.

19   The rabbinic literature under consideration includes the latest strata of the Talmudic compilations, the *Gemarot*, written down between *c.* 400 and *c.* 700, as well as midrashic commentaries, often of uncertain date.

the co-production approach enables us to look at those texts in a different, more productive light. The historical value of such documents lies precisely in the fact that they account for shared representations across the groups that Christian authors began to define as 'religions' during Late Antiquity.[20] This outlook enables us to look beyond the question of Jewish or Christian origins. Not only can this debate never be solved, but it also often relies on assumptions rooted in a static and atemporal definition of those religions and discounts years of research highlighting how religious identities were very much under construction during Late Antiquity and calling attention to the diversity of late antique religions.[21]

In this article, I will focus on the first three sections of the *Life of Jeremiah*, which recount the prophet's miracles, martyrdom, and post-mortem intercession in two Egyptian locations, Taphnis and Alexandria, and mention therapeutic pilgrimage to his tomb.[22] I will point out how their contents fit in with Hellenistic and early Roman (first and second centuries CE) Jewish literature. Where I have not found any relevant parallel in Jewish sources, I indicate not only the closest Christian traditions, but also what I consider to be pointed similarities in non-Jewish and non-Christian Greek literature, commonly referred to as 'pagan'. This analysis will, I hope, demonstrate that co-production is not only an apt descriptor for Jewish and Christian entanglements within a tradition or document whose original form is lost to us. It is also a historical process emerging from the religious framework of the Graeco-Roman period, when representations of the relations between mortals, deitie(s), and the dead were shared by many, whether Jews, Christians, or neither.

Jeremiah in Jewish Greek Literature: Martyr, Benefactor, Intercessor

The first three sentences of the *Life* indicate the locations of Jeremiah's birth and death, the manner of his death as well as his status among non-Jews while he was alive. He is said to have died in Taphnai, an alternate spelling for an Egyptian location rendered as Taḥpanḥes (תחפנחס) in the Hebrew Bible and as Taphnas (Ταφνας) in the Septuagint; Taphnis was the usual Greek spelling.[23] Biblical narratives do not broach the topic of the prophet's death: Taphnis was only the last place where he was active according to the Septuagint.[24] The *Life* picks up on the biblical tradition, which locates Pharaoh's palace there, but completely reframes it. In the biblical *Book of Jeremiah*, God ordered

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20 Massa, 'Nommer et classer les religions', pp. 689–715.

21 See for instance Belayche and Mimouni, *Entre lignes de partage et territoires de passage*; Gwynn and Bangert, *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, with an extensive bibliography.

22 Based on the outline by Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, p. 70.

23 Jeremiah 43. 7; LXX Jeremiah 50. 7–8.

24 LXX Jeremiah 50. 8.

the prophet to hide some stones under Pharaoh's palace in front of the Jews and to prophesize the upcoming destruction of Egypt at the hand of the neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, acting as God's instrument.[25] While in the Bible Jeremiah announced the Egyptians' demise in Pharaoh's Taphnis palace, the relationship between the Egyptians, the Jews, and the prophet is completely reversed in the *Life*, where Jeremiah is buried near Pharaoh's palace because 'the Egyptians […] benefitted (εὐεργετηθέντες) through him'. The stones, whose presence in the biblical narrative were a marker of Jeremiah's prophetic status, are turned into the instrument for his martyrdom.

There are many ancient traditions about the death of Jeremiah: in some he died peacefully, while in others he suffered martyrdom at the hands of 'his people' (τοῦ λαοῦ), meaning his fellow Jews. The term λαός, one of the many Greek words that can be translated as 'people', was commonly used by Jews to refer to themselves. Unjustly persecuted prophets are a biblical topos; the Bible reports that two were even executed. Zechariah son of Jehoiada was stoned on the command of King Joah (II Chronicles 24. 19–22) and Uriah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, on the order of King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26. 20–23).[26] As for Jeremiah himself, the Bible narrates how multiple people, among whom were his own townsfolk, wanted to kill him (Jeremiah 11. 21; 18. 18–23; 26. 8–15); he was struck, put in the stocks (20. 1–3), and imprisoned several times (37. 15–16; 38. 6). By the first century CE, the unjust persecution and killing of prophets by God's own people (the Jews) was an established motif in the Jewish milieux.[27] Jeremiah's death by stoning mirrors the fate of the biblical Zechariah; it is also described in another Jewish-Christian co-produced text, the *Paralipomena of Jeremiah*, dated to the second century CE. However, in the *Paralipomena*, the stoning happens in Jerusalem; as in the *Life*, the prophet's tomb is then turned into a landmark. In the early third century, the Christian writer Hippolytus also located the stoning of Jeremiah in Taphnai, using the same spelling as in our text.[28] Since the earliest mentions of Jeremiah dying as a martyr in Egypt come from co-produced texts, it is difficult to point out in which milieu this tradition originated. However, emphasizing the importance of biblical Egyptian locations is a feature of many Jewish Greek works, especially those that focus on relations between Jews and non-Jews: Heliopolis, for instance, is prominent in *Joseph and Aseneth*, a second-century BCE retelling of the biblical episode where Joseph marries an Egyptian woman;[29] a fragment attributed to Eupolemus, thought to be active

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25 Jeremiah 43. 8–13.

26 Zechariah son of Jehoiada is defined as a 'priest', but the biblical narrative suggests he was part of a group of 'prophets'. Talmudic literature (e.g. Palestinian Talmud, *Taanit*, 4. 5) identified all the biblical characters named Zechariah together and defined him as a martyred priest and prophet; see Halpern-Amaru, 'The Killing of the Prophets', pp. 153–80.

27 Cf. Hebrews 11. 37.

28 Hippolytus, *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, I. 12.

29 *Joseph and Aseneth*, I. 2.

during the same period, states that Abraham had lived there among Egyptian priests.[30] Two Jewish texts written in Egypt between the second century BCE and the first century CE mention annual on-site commemorations of miracles said to have happened for the Jews in Alexandria and Ptolemais-Hormou and stress that the said miracles also benefited non-Jews.[31] Those commemorations were still widely celebrated in the first century CE.[32] One of them is connected to the building of a commemorative monument, which would have imbued the landscape with the memory of the miracle, much like Jeremiah's tomb in the *Life*. The focus on architectural landmarks coincides with the multiplication of monumental tombs in early Roman Palestine.[33] It thus seems credible to interpret the stoning and burying of Jeremiah in Taphnis as the prevalent tradition about the prophet's death in the Jewish Egyptian Diaspora, taken up by at least some of their Palestinian co-religionists.[34]

The *Life* justifies Jeremiah's burial in a place of honour by his benefaction toward the Egyptians; his status as a benefactor is expressed by the Greek verb εὐεργετέω. In the Greek and later Roman worlds, when someone funded public services in a *polis*, they were officially rewarded and given the title of εὐεργέτης; the word was also included in the titularies of many Hellenistic monarchs. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the verb εὐεργετέω is used to describe God's benevolent attitude towards his people.[35] In Jewish Greek literature, this status of εὐεργέτης is attributed to some biblical figures who, like Jeremiah in the *Life*, are said to have benefited non-Jews. During the first century CE, Philo of Alexandria defined Joseph as a benefactor of the Egyptians, an interpretation also found in another co-produced text from the early Roman period, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.[36] The motif and lexicon of the εὐεργέτης prophet stoned or nearly stoned by his own are also found in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in the late first century CE; he elaborated on a biblical episode where Moses complained to God that he risked being stoned.[37] However, in the *Life*, the description of Jeremiah's benefaction, which results from his status as an intercessor, displays a specific trait: it continued after he died.

The theology of post-mortem intercession, in which some exceptionally pious dead are credited with the power to recommend living people to God appeared within Judaism during the Hellenistic period.[38] Its earliest recorded

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30 Pseudo-Eupolemus, *On the Jews*, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparatio evangelica*, IX. 17. 8.
31 III Maccabees 7. 17–20; Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, II. 40–41.
32 Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, II. 55.
33 Keddie, 'The "Vitae Prophetarum" and the Archaeology of Jewish Burials', pp. 79–98.
34 Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, p. 571.
35 LXX Psalms 12. 6; 56. 3; 114. 7.
36 Philo of Alexandria, *De Iosepho*, 19; *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, 'Testament of Joseph', XX. 6.
37 Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, III. 12–14; cf. Exodus 17. 4.
38 Baruch 3. 4; Apocalypse of Zephaniah 11. 1–6. A Jewish apocalyptic text written at the end

mention is found in II Maccabees, a Greek epitome of a near-contemporary account of the revolt against Seleucid rule that broke out in Judaea during the 160s BCE; interestingly, this earliest Jewish account of post-mortem intercession also features Jeremiah as the intercessor.[39] Before the final battle, the protagonist Judas Maccabeus has a prophetic dream. He first sees the former high priest Onias, and then the prophet, who is introduced as follows:

εἴθ᾽ οὕτως ἐπιφανῆναι ἄνδρα πολιᾷ καὶ δόξῃ διαφέροντα, θαυμαστὴν δέ τινα καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεστάτην εἶναι τὴν περὶ αὐτὸν ὑπεροχήν. ἀποκριθέντα δὲ τὸν Ονιαν εἰπεῖν Ὁ φιλάδελφος οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πολλὰ προσευχόμενος περὶ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ τῆς ἁγίας πόλεως Ιερεμιας ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ προφήτης. προτείναντα δὲ Ιερεμιαν τὴν δεξιὰν παραδοῦναι τῷ Ιουδα ῥομφαίαν χρυσῆν, διδόντα δὲ προσφωνῆσαι τάδε Λαβὲ τὴν ἁγίαν ῥομφαίαν δῶρον παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, δι᾽ ἧς θραύσεις τοὺς ὑπεναντίους.[40]

> Thereupon appeared a man of distinguished gray hair and grandeur, about whom there was a preeminence which was somehow amazing and most magnificent. And after Onias responded, saying, 'This lover of his brethren who offers many prayers for the people and the Holy City is Jeremiah, the prophet of God', Jeremiah, stretching out his right hand to give Judas a golden broadsword, addressed him as follows while handing it over: 'Take this holy broadsword as a gift from God, with which you shall shatter the enemies'.[41]

In the *Life*, Jeremiah is described as a prophet who died a violent death at the hands of other Jews. He also performed miracles which benefited non-Jews and, after his death, became an intercessor with the power to grant victory on God's behalf. All those features had previously been attributed to different figures, either in the Hebrew Bible or in Jewish Greek literature of the Hellenistic period. The *Life*'s innovation lies in simultaneously attributing them to the same person.

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of the first century CE, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, but only transmitted in Christian translations and recensions, suggests that workings of intercession were debated within Judaism at the time; see IV Esdras 7. 45–8. 40.

39   Jeremiah is a prominent figure in Jewish Greek literature. Sirach 49. 7 puts him on equal footing with Moses. The second festal letter prefixed to II Maccabees (II Maccabees 1. 19–2. 18), written in the 140s BCE, singles out Nehemiah and Jeremiah as predecessors to Judas Maccabee. Jeremiah is also credited with hiding the Temple's furnishing before he went into exile, a tradition which also found its way into the latter part of the *Life of Jeremiah*; see Xeravits, 'Common Themes in the Early Jewish Prophetic Biographies of "Vitae Prophetarum"', pp. 437–50.

40   II Maccabees 15. 13–16 in *Septuaginta*, ed. by Rahlfs.

41   II Maccabees 15. 13–16, trans. by Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, p. 493.

Protection from Snakes: Alexander and Jeremiah

The *Life* focuses on one specific feat by Jeremiah: his ability to protect against reptiles endemic to the Nile region: asps (ἀσπίδες), a species of extremely venomous snake, and crocodiles (κροκόδιλοι). The prophet's benefaction expressed itself differently through time: when alive, he was able to repel both animals from land and river. After his death, his remains could cure people who had been bitten by snakes. When they were spread around Alexandria, they once again drove the dangerous reptiles away. The fear of snakes was pervasive all through antiquity; many amulets and banishing-spells from all around the Mediterranean targeted them.[42] Among the few Christian saints who were known for curing a specific ailment, Saint Phocas, whose tomb was in Antioch of Syria, specialized in snake bites.[43] In the *Life*, the grouping of the asps and crocodiles can be explained by the Egyptian context of the story: both Taphnis and Alexandria are located in the marshy Nile delta. While Charles Torrey considered the mention of crocodiles a later addition, Anna Maria Schwemer accepted it as integral to the text.[44]

The rest of the story revolves around Alexander the Great. He was the one who transferred Jeremiah's relics to Alexandria to protect the city he had just founded in very unhospitable terrain. The king also introduced another species of snakes to ward off the venomous ones. Alexander's intervention may echo the stories of the gods Ammon-Ra and Horus triumphing over Apophis and Seth-Typhon, as well as the representation of Horus simultaneously capturing snakes and trampling crocodiles:[45] fighting such reptiles had become a characteristic of Egyptian heroes, later passed on to both Coptic and Muslim holy men.[46] In any case, the story of Alexander killing a snake before he founded Alexandria found its way into the mainstream Greek tradition. According to the *Alexander Romance*, a snake (δράκων) was terrorizing the workmen who were building the city. After the king had it killed and ordered a temple erected on its grave, it became the protector of Alexandria under the name Agathos Daimon; from its precinct sprang new harmless snakes that protected the houses against their fellow animals.[47] The similarities between the *Life of*

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42 For examples of Akkadian spells against snakes and snake bites, see Foster, *Before the Muses*, I, pp. 128–29.

43 Gregory of Tours, *The Glory of the Martyrs*, ch. 98.

44 Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets*, p. 21 n. 5, *contra* Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, p. 573 n. 3.

45 Ritner, 'Horus on the Crocodiles', pp. 103–16.

46 Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexanderromans*, pp. 36–38; Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Crocodiles et saints du Nil', pp. 733–60.

47 *Alexander Romance* I. 32. 6–7 A, ed. by. Kroll, p. 32. The Greek text, taken from a single eleventh-century manuscript from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS fonds grec 1711, is heavily corrupted and largely reconstructed based on two Armenian translations. For an English translation of the relevant passage, see Ogden, 'Chapter 5. Alexander, Agathos Daimon, and Ptolemy', pp. 130–31.

Jeremiah and what is considered the standard narrative about the foundation of Alexandria are obvious, down to the introduction of protective snakes to chase away the asps. The *Life* nevertheless features Jewish semantics. First, the denomination 'Alexander the Macedonian' (Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μακεδών) is rare in ancient sources, only found in rabbinic literature as אלכסנדרוס מוקדון.[48]

Additionally, in the *Life*, protective snakes are given the name 'Argolai', whose etymology is uncertain; the author translated it as 'snake fighters' (ὀφιομάχοι) in Greek. Outside of this text, the name ὀφιομάχος for an animal is uncommon and only appears in the Septuagint list of kosher animals under the substantival form ὀφιομάχης.[49] It is a hapax legomenon in Greek, only found in biblical commentaries and subsequently included in late antique *lexica*.

Scholarly consensus has it that the *Life*'s account is either a Jewish or a Christian reworking of the original Greek tradition. However, while it is generally taken for granted that the *Alexander Romance* utilizes Hellenistic material, the earliest version of the text is dated *c.* 300 CE. We cannot completely disregard the possibility that *Life*'s account would have been earlier, especially since the date of composition of the *Romance* episode in which Alexander kills the Egyptian snake is uncertain.[50] In any case, the Alexandrian foundation myth is the result of a co-production process drawing from various sources: Egyptian mythology, Greek foundation stories, and, in some cases, Jewish material.[51] The existence of a Jewish version of an Alexander story is not a rarity.[52] There was a wealth of Jewish traditions about the king, transmitted in rabbinic literature and in Jewish recensions of the *Alexander Romance* in both Greek and Hebrew.[53] None of those include the translation of Jeremiah's relics, which attests to the diversity of ancient Jewish culture. The story, however, does appear in an eleventh-century rabbinic biblical commentary, the Midrash Rabbah on Exodus; it is usually attributed to Moshe Ha-Darshan, a rabbi from Narbonne in southern France. This author was known for using apocryphal, non-rabbinic traditions, which suggests that he knew the story from a now lost Jewish source.[54] Three centuries later, a fourteenth-century Syriac recension introduced Jeremiah as a mentor to Alexander; this new Christian development may have been inspired by the *Life*'s connection between the two figures.[55]

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48 See for instance Babylonian Talmud, *Tamid*, 32b, ed. and trans. by Steinsaltz, p. 455.

49 LXX Leviticus 11. 22.

50 Debié, *Alexandre le Grand en syriaque*, pp. 134–38, and pp. 181–82.

51 For the Greek stories where the founding hero had to kill a snake, see Ogden, 'Chapter 5. Alexander, Agathos Daimon, and Ptolemy', pp. 132–34.

52 Amitay, 'Alexander in Ancient Jewish Literature', pp. 109–42.

53 On the Jewish composition of the Greek ε recension, see Delling, 'Alexander der grosse als Bekenner des jüdischen Gottesglaubens', pp. 1–51; on the Hebrew translation from the Greek, see van Bekkum, 'Alexander the Great in Medieval Hebrew Literature', pp. 218–26.

54 Midrash Rabbah on Numbers xxx. 15. See Halpern-Amaru, 'The Killing of the Prophets'.

55 Jouanno, 'Alexandre à Jérusalem', pp. 75–95.

Alexander's part in the *Life of Jeremiah* perfectly fits with the role he played in ancient Jewish literature. Like everyone else in the Graeco-Roman world, the Jews saw him as the ultimate legitimizing figure;[56] the purpose of the fictional account of his visit to the Jerusalem Temple, which was already circulating by the first century CE, was to lend it prestige.[57] Asserting that such an illustrious figure recognized a prophet's benefaction is an apologetic strategy. Conversely, by demoting the king to a mere supporting character status and alleging that Alexandria was actually safeguarded by one of their own, the Jews painted themselves as useful members of society and as its guardians, as they did elsewhere.[58] Such claims also support the Alexandrian Jews' petition to be granted the same rights as the Greek citizens of the city.[59] Whereas the mid-second-century BCE Jewish author of the *Letter of Aristeas* asserted that most of the Jews came to Egypt alongside King Ptolemy I, Alexander's successor, the *Life* takes it further by suggesting that Alexander himself could not have founded the city without Jewish intervention.[60] By doing so, he paints the Jews as the reason for the city's prosperity and subsequent prestige.[61]

Jeremiah's Post-mortem Miracles: The Widespread Belief in the Efficacy of Relics

According to the *Life*, the help that Jeremiah was able to provide during his lifetime continued after he died.

> καὶ ὅσοι εἰσὶ πιστοὶ θεοῦ ἕως σήμερον εὔχονται ἐν τῷ τόπῳ καὶ λαμβάνοντες τοῦ χοὸς τοῦ τόπου δήγματα ἀσπίδων θεραπεύουσι.[62]

> Those who are God's faithful pray at the place to this very day and taking the dust of the place they heal asps' bites.[63]

The text later adds that it was 'the remains' (τὰ λείψανα) from 'the prophet's grave' (τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ προφήτου) that were transferred from Taphnis to Alexandria, where they protected the land and river from snakes, much like Jeremiah was able to do by praying while he was alive. His remains were thus credited with the power to cure and to protect from a specific affliction, and this power

56   Bloch, 'Alexandre le Grand et le judaïsme', pp. 145–62.

57   Attali, 'Alexandre dupé dans la littérature rabbinique de l'Antiquité tardive', pp. 81–92.

58   See for instance the Book of Esther where Mordechai, is credited with saving King Artaxerxes from the treacherous minister Haman.

59   On the conflict between the Jews and the Alexandrian citizens in 38–41 CE, see Modrzejewski, *Joseph, Les Juifs d'Égypte*, pp. 131–41.

60   *Letter of Aristeas* 4 and 11–12.

61   A similar conclusion is reached by Debié, *Alexandre le Grand en syriaque*, pp. 289–300; she, however, denies the Jewish origins of the *Life of Jeremiah* and ascribes these features to a Christian redaction.

62   Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets*, p. 21.

63   Hare, 'The Lives of the Prophets', p. 387.

could be transmitted to another substance (here, the soil) by physical contact. According to the author, people visited Jeremiah's tomb in Taphnis with the intent of obtaining this cure. A therapeutic ritual was thus born: the power of the relics, activated by sincere prayer, could perform what we commonly call a miracle. Upon their transfer to Alexandria, it seems like prayer was not needed anymore, and that the relics, whose efficacy had become inherent, granted their protection indiscriminately.

The basis for this belief is found in the Hebrew Bible, where a dead man was thrown by accident into the grave of the prophet Elisha and, upon touching his bones, was instantly revived (II Kings 13. 21). The combination of allusions found in Jewish Greek literature with exogenous testimonies opens the possibility that a martyrs' tomb located in Daphne by Antioch (*Asia*) was imbued with therapeutic power by local Jews during the early Roman period;[64] archaeological finds attest that relics were indeed used to communicate with the dead in both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts at the time.[65] However, there is no Jewish literary account that explicitly describes any practice derived from such conceptions until the sixth century CE. The earliest Jewish mention of intentional communication with a major biblical figure at his grave is found in a rabbinic commentary on the Book of Lamentations, composed *c.* 500 in Palestine. According to Judah b. Simon, a Palestinian rabbi said to be active in the fourth century, students built a study-house on the biblical King Hezekiah's tomb hoping that he would share his wisdom with them.[66] The Babylonian Talmud, compiled in the Sassanian empire and conventionally dated to the seventh to eight centuries, records two calls for post-mortem intercession at gravesites. Commenting on the Israelites' first foray into Canaan (Numbers 13. 22), the fourth-century Babylonian rabbi Rava states that Caleb prostrated himself on the graves (*kever*) of the Hebron and asked them to request mercy (*rahamim*) for him.

אָמַר רָבָא: מְלַמֵּד שֶׁפֵּירַשׁ כָּלֵב מֵעֲצַת מְרַגְּלִים, וְהָלַךְ וְנִשְׁתַּטַּח עַל קִבְרֵי אָבוֹת. אָמַר לָהֶן: אֲבוֹתַי! בִּקְּשׁוּ עָלַי רַחֲמִים שֶׁאֶנָּצֵל מֵעֲצַת מְרַגְּלִים

> Rava says: 'This teaches that Caleb separated himself from the counsel of the other spies and went and prostrated himself on the graves of the forefathers in Hebron. He said to them: "My forefathers, pray for mercy for me so that I will be saved from the counsel of the spies"'.[67]

The second Talmudic reference to on-site post-mortem intercession is set in a contemporary ritual context: the widespread custom among Jews of visiting cemeteries on fast days. Two third-century Palestinian rabbis, Levi bar Ḥama

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64   Attali and Massa, 'A Pagan Temple, a Martyr Shrine, and a Synagogue in Daphne', pp. 75–97.
65   Bohak, 'Magic in the Cemeteries of Late-Antique Palestine', pp. 157–74; Klein and Zissu, 'Oil Lamps, Spearheads and Skulls', pp. 399–421.
66   Midrash Rabbah on Lamentations, petitah 25.
67   Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah*, 34b, ed. and trans. by Steinsaltz, p. 213.

and Ḥanina, discuss the reason for this practice; one of them posits asking the dead for mercy. The Talmudic text immediately adds that, for this purpose, one should only visit Jewish cemeteries.[68] This rabbinic debate shows that, at least by *c.* 600, and possibly as early as the third century, the practice of asking the dead for their intercession at their graves was popular among Jews, while its theological grounds remained debated among rabbis. Indeed, while late antique rabbinic texts do mention the principle of post-mortem intercession, there is none that explicitly bears witness to its efficacy, unless accidentally, much like in the Hebrew Bible.[69] This silence seems deliberate, as rabbis were opposed to the sanctification of sites outside Jerusalem and only reluctantly accepted the veneration of major Jewish figures.[70]

In stark contrast to the elusiveness of Jewish sources, Christian documents from the third century onwards expatiate on the efficacy of relics from martyrs and then from all the pious figures given the status of saint.[71] In the *Life*, the reason for Jeremiah's remains being imbued with power is not explicitly stated: did it stem from his status as a prophet or as a martyr? However, through the whole *Life of the Prophets*' text, only two post-mortem miracles are recorded; both are attributed to prophets whose martyrdom is described, Jeremiah and Isaiah.[72] The composition milieu of the text thus most likely considered martyrdom the cause for post-mortem efficacy. The idea that the remains of a martyr could heal is considered by several scholars a uniquely Christian trait. In the words of Daniel Ogden:

> It is hard to believe that the Jeremiah material as we have it, with its motif of martyrdom, antedates the Christian era (nice as it would have been to imagine that this was a variant of the foundation legend designed at an early stage to engage and include Hellenistic Alexandria's large Jewish population).[73]

In a similar vein, David Satran has argued that the *Lives of the Prophets* was an entirely Christian text composed during the fourth century or later, when pilgrimages to the tombs of martyrs had become a feature of Christianity.[74] Indeed, the closest parallel to the healing soil motif is found in the Greek version of the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, whose original Syriac *Vorlage* is

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68   Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit*, 16a.

69   One accidental case is reported in Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 18b, where a man who sought refuge in a cemetery and slept there heard about the future from two spirits by chance and benefited from this knowledge.

70   Boustan, 'Jewish Veneration of the "Special Dead"', pp. 61–68.

71   See n. 3 above.

72   In the *Life of Isaiah*, people bury the martyred prophet near Siloam so they can continue to benefit from his ability to provide drinking water; see Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, pp. 561–69.

73   Ogden, 'Chapter 5. Alexander, Agathos Daimon, and Ptolemy', p. 142.

74   Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine*.

dated to the first half of the third century CE. In this narrative, Thomas is referred to as Judas; after he was martyred, the Indian king Mazdai believed that his bones would heal his ailing son.

Συνέβη δὲ μετὰ πολὺν χρόνον ἓν τῶν τέκνων Μισδαίου τοῦ βασιλέως κρουσθῆναι ὑπὸ δαίμονος, καὶ οὐδεὶς αὐτὸν ἠδυνήθη θεραπεῦσαι· πάνυ γὰρ ἦν χαλεπὸς ὁ δαίμων. ἐνεθυμήθη δὲ Μισδαῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ εἶπεν· Ἀπελθὼν ἀνοίξω τὸν τάφον, καὶ ἄρας ὀστοῦν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου τοῦ θεοῦ κρεμάσω ἐπὶ τὸν υἱόν μου, καὶ θεραπευθήσεται. Ἐν ὅσῳ δὲ τοῦτο ὁ Μισδαῖος ἐνεθυμήθη, φανεὶς αὐτῷ ὁ ἀπόστολος Θωμᾶς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Εἰς ζῶντα οὐκ ἐπίστευσας, καὶ εἰς νεκρὸν πιστεύεις; πλὴν μὴ φοβοῦ· σπλαγχνίζεται γὰρ εἰς σὲ καὶ ἐλεεῖ σε ὁ κύριός μου Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς διὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χρηστότητα. Ἀπελθὼν δὲ καὶ ἀνοίξας οὐχ εὗρεν ἐκεῖ τὸν ἀπόστολον· εἷς γὰρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν κλέψας αὐτὸν εἰς Μεσοποταμίαν ἀπήγαγεν. ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ τόπου ἐκείνου ἔνθα τὰ ὀστᾶ τοῦ ἀποστόλου ἔκειτο χοῦν ὁ Μισδαῖος λαβὼν περιέθηκεν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ λέγων· Πιστεύω εἰς σὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστὲ νῦν ὅτε κα […] νος ὁ ταράσσων τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἀντικείμενος αὐτοῖς ἵνα μὴ ἴδωσίν σε. Καὶ κρεμάσαντος αὐτοῦ τῷ παιδὶ ὑγιὴς ὁ παῖς ἐγένετο.[75]

And it happened after a long time that one of the sons of king Mazdai had a devil and no man was able to bind him because he was very violent. And king Mazdai thought in his mind and said: 'I will go (and) open the grave of Judas and take one of the bones of the apostle of God and will hang it upon my son and he will be healed.' And Judas appeared to him in a vision and said to him: 'You did not believe in one living, will you believe in one who, behold, is dead? But do not fear. My Lord the Messiah will have mercy on you because of his clemency.' And he did not find his bones for one of the brothers had taken them away secretly and conveyed them to the West. And king Mazdai took (some) of the dust of that spot where the bones of the apostle had lain and sprinkled it on his son and said: 'I believe in you my Lord Jesus now that he has left me who always troubles men that they may not see the light.' And when he had sprinkled (it) upon his son and had believed, he was healed.[76]

In this account, the martyred apostle Thomas clearly acts as an intercessor. Like in the *Life*, the efficacy of his relics was transmitted to the ground they were buried in and persisted after his corpse was removed from the site. However, in this explicitly Christian narrative, Mazdai had a vision of Thomas and had to profess his belief in Jesus for his son to be healed. None of these elements have any parallel in Jeremiah's case. The assumption that the story of Jeremiah's post-mortem miracle could only have originated in a Christian

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75   Acts of Thomas 170, ed. by Bonnet, pp. 285–86.
76   Trans. by Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, pp. 250–51, slightly modified.

milieu hence seems rather uncompelling. Moreover, the conviction that the remains of the dead held therapeutic power was not limited to Jews and Christians during the Roman era. Some types of soil were already used as cures for snakes' bites during the Hellenistic period, as reported by Pliny in the 70s CE about the island of Ibiza.[77] Even more compelling is the testimony of the second-century CE Graeco-Syrian author Lucian of Samosata who, in his *Lover of Lies*, staged a discussion about various healing practices. After the discussants praise the gods for curing the sick and restoring them to health, one of them then tells a story from his youth, when a servant of his father was bitten by a viper. The snake is described as a θηρίον ('wild animal'), a diminutive form for the word θήρ used in the *Life* to describe the crocodiles. Although he seemed on the brink of death, the servant was cured by a 'Chaldean' (Χαλδαῖος). This Mazdaean religious expert from Persia, often credited with supra-human powers, including resurrection, in Greek culture, used a 'song' or 'spell' (ἐπῳδή) and 'a fragment […] from the tombstone of a dead maiden' (νεκρᾶς παρθένου λίθον ἀπὸ τῆς στήλης).[78] The Chaldean then accompanied the healed man back to his farm and drove every kind of reptiles away. In this account, the song functions like Jeremiah's prayer; it enables the Chaldean to activate the power of an object which had been in contact with the remains of a dead person of special status — a virgin girl. While Lucian was a satirist who made fun of people's gullibility, he does document beliefs that were commonly held during his lifetime.[79]

There are additional codicological and thematic counterarguments to the healing remains/soil motif being necessarily Christian. First, the twelfth-century main manuscript witness to the most Christianized recension of the *Lives of the Prophets*, which adds an entry about John the Baptist and was attributed to the late fourth-century bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, omits the whole sentence.[80] It does, however, appear in the oldest and best manuscript, dated to the sixth century and which, as shown by G. Anthony Keddie, does not include any indisputably Christian element.[81]

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77 Pliny, *Nat.*, III. 76.

78 Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 11–12, in Lucian, *vol. III*, ed. by Henderson and trans. by Harmon. For a Greek story of resurrection by a Chaldean, see Iamblichus, *Babylonian History*, 74b42, trans. by Stephens and Winkler, *Ancient Greek Novels*, p. 192.

79 For a similar case during the same period, see the debate about the evil eye in Heliodorus, *Æthiopica*, III. 7. 2–5.

80 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fonds grec 1115; see Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, pp. 540–41. Interestingly, Hare, 'The Lives of the Prophets', p. 387 n. f., interprets the omission of that sentence from the most Christianized manuscript as a hint that it could be a gloss, and does not consider that it could have been voluntary suppressed by a Christian hand.

81 Città della Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Codex Marchalianus MS Gk. 2125. See Keddie, 'The "Vitae Prophetarum" and the Archaeology of Jewish Burials', p. 87 n. 40; Schwemer, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen*, pp. 577–78 n. 8.

The *Life's* account of Jeremiah's post-mortem miracles has as much to do with Graeco-Roman traditions as with Christian ones; more accurately, the Christian belief in the efficacy of the relics was derived from a widespread and shared representation. Based on biblical precedents and Hellenistic theology, it was reserved for models of piety in its Jewish and Christian versions.

Divine Power as Mystery

In the *Life*, the power of Jeremiah's relics is defined as 'his mysteries' (αὐτοῦ τά μυστήρια), a word belonging to the Greek cultic vocabulary. While its adoption in Christianity is well-known, we should note that Greek Jewish literature also used it to describe the workings of divine power.[82] It appears as such in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, a Jewish Greek text composed in Alexandria between the first century BCE and the first century CE and placed under the authority of the eponymous biblical king. Its author develops a traditional opposition between the wicked and the 'righteous' (δικαιοί); he states that the latter will gain knowledge of the 'mysteries of God' (μυστήρια θεοῦ) and that their death and 'ill-treatment' (κάκωσις) will be rewarded with God's benefaction — using the verb εὐεργετέω mentioned earlier — in the form of 'immortality' (ἀθανασία).[83] Those representations lay the groundwork for the theology at play in the *Life*, where the power of the martyred Jeremiah persisted after his death.

The traditional vocabulary of Greek mysteries is also frequently found in the works of the early first-century CE Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria to define religious knowledge acquired under divine inspiration (in Greek ἐνθουσιασμός).[84] Philo ascribed it to several biblical figures, including Moses and Jeremiah, and introduced himself as having been initiated by both:

> καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ παρὰ Μωυσεῖ τῷ θεοφιλεῖ μυηθεὶς τὰ μεγάλα μυστήρια ὅμως αὖθις Ἰερεμίαν τὸν | προφήτην ἰδὼν καὶ γνούς, ὅτι οὐ μόνον μύστης ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἱεροφάντης ἱκανός, ὐκ ὤκνησα φοιτῆσαι πρὸς αὐτόν.

> I myself was initiated under Moses the God-beloved into the greater mysteries, yet when I saw the prophet Jeremiah and knew him to be not only himself enlightened, but a worthy minister of the holy secrets, I was not slow to become his disciple.[85]

Philo conferred to both Moses and Jeremiah the status of 'hierophant'. In the Greek world, the ἱεροφάντης was the initiating priest at the Eleusinian mysteries; the word also broadly characterized any teacher of religious rites. In addition

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82 Stroumsa, 'Mystère juif et mystère chrétien: le mot et la chose', pp. 45–62.

83 Wisdom of Solomon 2. 21–22; 3. 1–4; 5. 15.

84 D'Helt, 'Mystères et Initiation chez Philon d'Alexandrie', pp. 97–109.

85 Philo, *De Cherubim* 49 in Philo, *vol. II*, trans. by Colson and Whitaker.

to Moses and Jeremiah, Philo also described the Jewish high priest and the Jews who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in Alexandria as ἱεροφάνται.[86] The common trait between those figures is their ability to communicate with God. Like Moses in the Bible, the divinely inspired translators were thus able to perform a miracle: they all wrote the same exact Greek text, without any variant.[87] We see the similarities with Jeremiah's status in the *Life*, where he performs miracles by communicating with God through prayer. It thus stands to reason that the activated power of an intercessor would be expressed through mystic vocabulary. Consequently, in a study where he connects Philo's initiation by Jeremiah with the *Life* of the prophet, René Bloch cautiously suggests that Jeremiah could have been venerated in Egypt during the early first century CE.[88] While this Jewish definition of mystery was originally expressed in Greek, it ultimately found its way into Hebrew literature. In a late fifth-century or early sixth-century rabbinic commentary on Leviticus, מסתירין (*misterin*), a Hebrew calque of the Greek μυστήριον, is used in the phrase the 'mystery of Israel' (מיסטורין שלישראל) to define the God-given miraculous power by which Moses smote the Egyptians.[89] The uses of מסתירין and its cognates to label the relationship between some mortals and divine power derived from an already established theology; one does not need to posit a Christian influence on rabbinic representations to explain it.[90] Once again, it resulted from co-produced representations that were shared in the Greek-speaking and later Roman world.

The description of a Jewish pilgrimage to the tomb of the martyred prophet Jeremiah in Taphnis of Egypt included in the *Lives of the Prophets* is the product of Hellenistic and early Roman Jewish theology and practices, which were born out of shared representations across communities in the Graeco-Roman world. In this respect, the contents of the entry were historically co-produced. Additionally, although there is no need to posit a Christian influence at least on its first half, the *Life of Jeremiah* is indeed a co-produced document. It is only known to us because it was transmitted in the Christian milieux and attests to practices and beliefs that were held by Jews and Christians alike, as well as by some early Muslim believers.[91]

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86   Philo, *De Specialibus legibus*, III. 135; *De Vita Mosis*, II. 40.
87   Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, II. 37–39.
88   Bloch, 'Philo and Jeremiah', , pp. 431–42.
89   Midrash Rabbah on Leviticus XXXII. 4; see Petuchowski, 'Judaism as "Mystery"', pp. 141–52.
90   *Contra* Herman, 'On the Term "Mystery" in the Classical Rabbinic Literature', pp. 317–28.
91   Bursi, 'Fluid Boundaries', pp. 478–510; Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*.

Appendix: **English translation of the first three sections of the *Life of Jeremiah*[92]**

Jeremiah was from Anathoth, and he died in Taphnai of Egypt, having been stoned by his people. He was buried in the environs of Pharaoh's palace, because the Egyptians held him in high esteem, having been benefitted through him. For he prayed, and the asps left them, and the monsters of the waters, which the Egyptians call *Nephoth* and the Greeks crocodiles. And those who are God's faithful pray at the place to this very day, and taking the dust of the place they heal asps' bites. And we have heard from the children of Antigonus and Ptolemy, old men, that Alexander the Macedonian, after standing at the prophet's grave and witnessing his mysteries, transferred his remains to Alexandria and placed them in a circle around (the city) with due honour; and the whole race of asps was kept from the land, and from the river. And to the same end he introduced the snakes which are called *Argolai*, which means snake-fighters.

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92 Hare, 'The Lives of The Prophets', pp. 386–87.

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