

Rabbi Dr. Holzer is Director of the Mohs Surgery Clinic in the Department of Dermatology, Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, and is an assistant editor of the recent RCA *Siddur Avodat HaLev*.

THE FIRST YOM YERUSHALAYIM? THE BYZANTINE PREHISTORY OF LAG BA-OMER

In Jerusalem today there is the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Jerusalem is the cynosure of three of the world's religions, and the close juxtaposition of their three holy places has caused conflicts that are well known. What is not well known is the sequence of events that led to the construction of these holy places. It is a history that, from the current perspective, is full of surprising alliances, sometimes explicit, sometimes *de facto*, reflecting very different conflicts, and sometimes no conflict at all. Two little-known historical events—the alliance of the Emperor Julian with the Jewish people in his effort to subvert Byzantine Christianity,¹ and the initial reception by the Jews of the construction of the Dome of the Rock—may perhaps shed light on the most mysterious holiday on the Jewish calendar, *Lag ba-Omer*.

The Holy Land Under Byzantium: From Bad to Worse

A good starting point for this discussion is the rise of the Byzantine Empire. The fourth century was a time of particular challenge for the Jews of the Holy Land. Jews had learned to live under Rome, an aggressive but ideologically neutral colonizing power. The adoption of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in 312 CE and his 324 defeat of Licinius, Emperor of the eastern part of the Empire, meant that Jews had suddenly come under the dominion of their fiercest theological opponents and, in due course, tormentors. From the start, Jerusalem was aggressively Christianized; maps were disseminated and pilgrimage was encouraged as part of a

¹ An early comprehensive review of the relationship between Emperor Julian and the Jews can be found in Michael Adler, “The Emperor Julian and the Jews,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 5:4 (1893), 591–651. His conclusion that the Temple dedication did not actually take place is contested by later scholarship, cited below.

TRADITION

campaign of Christian appropriation of the Holy Land.² In a reprise of draconian Hadrianic decrees, Jews found themselves barred from Jerusalem except to mourn its destruction, and thereby, once yearly, bear witness to their own subordination and supersession. Constantine's successors imposed economically discriminatory legislation, and did not restrain Christian persecution of Jews. The charged atmosphere inspired a limited Jewish revolt in 351 against the Caesar of the East, Constantius Gallus, who was based in Sepphoris, Tiberias and Lod, before it was put down, with devastating effect.³

While the rabbinic leadership was apparently not involved in the revolt, the ancient empirical Jewish calendar system ceased in 358; the relationship of this to the foregoing events, if any, is a matter of debate, but the proximity is certainly suspicious. The immediate subsequent century saw the ending of the patriarchate—the office of Nasi—by decree of the Byzantine authorities, and the closure of the Talmud Yerushalmi, more than a century ahead of its Babylonian counterpart produced under Persian rule. In subsequent centuries, with its community constricted by ever-tightening vises of imperial legislation,⁴ the Land of Israel would come to be decisively eclipsed by Babylonia as the seat of Jewish learning; its primary output would be *piyyut*, along with some halakhic manuals (*masekhtot ketanot*) and works of aggada.

Jews would continue to push back against Byzantine oppression, joining with Samaritans in revolts in the sixth century, and the denouement of Byzantine rule in Syria Palaestina under Heraclius was marked by a Jewish revolt in tandem with the Sassanid invasion. The Byzantines' spectacularly brutal trouncing of the latter is assumed to have inspired the historical core for the Jewish apocalyptic work *Sefer Zerubavel*, the basis for medieval Jewish eschatology. Forced baptism of Jews was decreed in 630, but in short order Heraclius was dispossessed of the Holy Land and all of Syria by the conquering Islamic armies of Umar ibn Khattab.

² Oded Irshai, "The Christian Appropriation of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century: The Case of the Bordeaux Pilgrim," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99:4 (2009), 485–486.

³ The historical accounts of this revolt come entirely from pagan and Christian sources of questionable reliability. Jewish sources confirm an increased military presence at this period, but the scale of destruction described in the former is not confirmed. However, the archaeological record (coin hoards) does affirm destruction in the city of Lod. See Gabriela Bijovsky, "Numismatic Evidence for the Gallus Revolt: The Hoard from Lod," *Israel Exploration Journal* 57:2 (2007), 197–203.

⁴ See Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Wayne State University Press, 1987), 89, who compares the contraction of scope of Jewish autonomy between the Theodosian and Justinian codes.

The Great Purple Hope: Julian and His Ill-Fated Pagan Restoration

Yet in 363, within the first few decades of Byzantine rule, Jews in Palestine experienced a most hopeful, uplifting, yet agonizingly brief chapter in their history. Emperor Julian, Gallus's half-brother, had reluctantly become Emperor at the close of 361. Having rejected Christianity from the outset of his reign, he revoked the privileges and powers assigned to Christian bishops, and promulgated edicts and policies guaranteeing religious freedom. An intellectual, Julian was a prolific author and his early writings were hostile to the Jewish religion, albeit to a lesser extent than to Christianity. But there seems to have been either a political calculation or, more likely, a genuine evolution in his thinking. By the end of 362, he had come to regard the God of Israel as the authentic fashioner of the universe⁵—for whom his pagan deities were but allegories—and who required sacrifice just as they did. After conversations with Antiochene Jews regarding why they did not sacrifice to their God, he sent an epistle to the Nasi Hillel II expressing his desire to rebuild and resettle the Jewish population in Jerusalem, just after his successful conclusion of his war with Persia.

Apparently, Julian decided that the project couldn't wait, and the epistle was followed by a meeting between Julian and Jewish leaders at his headquarters in Antioch, in Shevat (January–February) of 363. We can piece together from Christian sources that, at this meeting, the Emperor presented arguments from prophetic works (and perhaps oracles to convince pagans) that the time was ripe to rebuild the Temple. Alypius, formerly a vice prefect of Britain, was assigned to oversee the task. Crews of architects, workmen, and artisans were assembled and materials were gathered from all across the Empire. Special silver tools were fashioned to avoid the prohibition of cutting altar stones with iron implements. Finally, the date for laying the foundations arrived. A letter attributed to Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem (but regarded by most as a fifth-century forgery)⁶ describes, with many fanciful flourishes, an abortive attempt to lay the foundations of the Temple on Iyyar 18 (May 18, 363). The effort was rendered impossible due to storms, followed by an earthquake that

⁵ Johanan Lewy, "The Emperor Julian and the Rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem" [Hebrew], *Zion* (1941), 1–32.

⁶ See the comprehensive discussion of sources in David B. Levenson, "The Ancient and Medieval Sources for the Emperor Julian's Attempt to Rebuild the Jerusalem Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 35:4 (2004), 409–460. See further regarding Cyril's letter, David B. Levenson, "The Palestinian Earthquake of May 363 in Philostorgius, the Syriac Chronicon Miscellaneum, and the Letter Attributed to Cyril on the Rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6:1 (2013), 60–83.

evening and mysterious fires from the Temple Mount, which caused heavy casualties on the following day. The dates and historical core are assumed to be accurate; the dating of a major earthquake in the region to Iyyar 18, 363 is verified by archaeological evidence from elsewhere.⁷ Christian sources insist that these events were understood by all as a display of Divine displeasure, and ended the project; pagan sources understood the earthquake as a sign of mourning for the Emperor's imminent death.⁸ Scholars assume that the project was aborted either with the earthquake, or with the death of Julian on the night of June 26, 363, after having been mortally wounded on the Persian front. His successor, Jovian, immediately reestablished Christianity as the religion of Rome and reinstated the ban on Jews from Jerusalem.

Jewish Reactions to the Julianic Disappointment: The Fast of Lag ba-Omer

What was the interpretation of the events of 363 by those most affected, the Jews themselves? Scholars note that contemporaneous rabbinic writings display a deafening silence. There are several likely candidates in mainstream rabbinic literature for oblique references, but none can be linked to them in an unambiguous manner. It is difficult to fathom the exhilaration and disappointment that the Jews must have experienced in the space of a few short months in 363. When Benjamin Mazar's team, excavating beside the Western Wall beneath Robinson's Arch between 1968 and 1978, uncovered a jubilant Hebrew inscription from Isaiah 66:1, "And when you see this, your heart shall rejoice and bones like new grass," it was assumed that it dated from Julian's reign.⁹ What could possibly be the alternative? Conversely, there is a fast day ordained on Iyyar 18 that surfaces in numerous sources as late as the eighth century, which ostensibly references one or more events of that day, but also (or sometimes only) invokes the anniversary of the death of the Biblical personality Joshua, which seems to be a red herring.¹⁰ A Judeo-Arabic document from the

⁷ Oded Irshai notes Greek inscriptions from the Christian necropolis in Zoar that records deaths from an earthquake dated May 18, 363, which coincided with Iyyar 18 in that year. See his "The Earthquake in the Valley of Arbel: A Galilean Apocalyptic Tradition and its Historical-Liturgical Context" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature: Merkamim* 1 (2013), 107–132, and especially note 30.

⁸ See the discussion of sources in Levenson (2013).

⁹ Other interpretations have since been advanced. See discussion in Levenson (2004), 410.

¹⁰ There is an apparently prior teaching linking Joshua's burial with a Divine earthquake, owing to the people's neglect in paying their respects (*Shabbat* 105b cites this

Cairo Geniza explains: “They fasted on the 18th due to the death of Joshua, and there was an earthquake.”¹¹ One or both of these associations appear with the date in other sources from the Land of Israel; *paytanim* of the seventh and eighth century mention only Joshua, while the seventh-century apocalyptic work, *Sefer Zerubavel*, predicts an earthquake on Iyyar 18 among the events that will unfold in the eschaton. To date, the earliest source for the Iyyar 18 fast is an inscription on the wall of the synagogue in the town of Rehov, south of Beit She’an, which dates to the fifth century, though the date is simply part of a list of fast days, and explanations are not provided.

Observances for the date of Iyyar 18 are absent from the Babylonian Geonic sources—Persia was at war with the Byzantines, and their Jews were not caught up in this drama—and moreover, in its texts, Joshua’s passing is actually commemorated on Nissan 26 (or 27, in variant manuscripts). As for the second millennium centers of Jewish life in Europe, the fast of Iyyar 18 does surface in Italian manuscripts, which had direct access to traditions from the Land of Israel. However, Iyyar 18 has a very different resonance in the Ashkenazic and derivative French tradition—which often does preserve rites from the Land of Israel, by way of Italy—but the earliest known reference dates to no later than 1175.¹² All Franco-German sources instead refer to the day by its count in the *Omer* period: day 33 (vocalized *lag*), which is forever twinned with Iyyar 18 since the fixing of the calendar in 358. Also, *Lag ba-Omer* is already known from earlier times as a day on which mourning practices cease, or a minor holiday, rather than a fast; but scholars have labored in vain to find a satisfactory rationale for its celebrations.

A closer analysis of the programs of Constantine and his successors in Jerusalem—as juxtaposed with that of Julian—may help to explain the reticence and obfuscation with regard to the commemoration of what was perhaps a central event in Jewish polemical memory.

When to Create a Holiday: Theology and Temporal Signification, from Constantine to Julian

The edifice that serves as the architectural embodiment of the policy of the Byzantine Empire toward Jews and Jerusalem is the Church of the

in the name of second-century Amora’im), but the linkage does not appear to be associative; in the sources in which the earthquake is mentioned, either Joshua is not, or it is mentioned as a separate event.

¹¹ Shulamit Elizur, *Wherefore Have We Fasted?* (Graphit Press, 2007), 34.

¹² Mitchell First, “The Mysterious Origin of Lag Ba-Omer,” *Hakirah* 20 (2015), 205–217.

TRADITION

Holy Sepulcher, and it may prove useful to examine its dedication ceremony, just 28 years prior to Julian's project, as a foil for Julian's intentions.

With the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Constantine had remade Jerusalem, with its new Temple juxtaposed with the Temple's ruins, as a Christian focus of pilgrimage. The earliest pilgrimage account, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* from 333 to 334, already draws the intended contrast between the desolate, destroyed Temple Mount and the New Jerusalem that was taking shape in the form of the basilica to its west. To compound the insult, the Temple Mount and its environs were made into a refuse dump.¹³

The date chosen by Constantine for the consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is noted by scholars to be laden with symbolism. On the one hand, the eight days they spanned were chosen to roughly coincide with the ides of September and the *Ludi Romani*, pagan holidays celebrating the dedication of the Temple of Jupiter in Rome. The oration of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, on the occasion indicates that a major theme of the ceremony was to Christianize what had been Aelia Capitolina and to depict Constantine as a warrior against decadent paganism. On the other hand, September 13, 335 was a Saturday, the rejected Jewish Sabbath, and likely corresponded precisely to Yom Kippur of that year, and numerous borrowings were made from Yom Kippur themes and observances—rejected by Christianity—for the dedication ceremony. The ceremony would also become the basis of a new eight-day festival, the Encaenia.¹⁴ The dedication of Solomon's Temple likewise spanned the period encompassing Yom Kippur and Sukkot, and elements of the architecture and decor of the church were consciously modeled upon the Temple,¹⁵ in a thematic, temporal, and spatial reiteration of the Christian doctrine of supersessionism. The equation of Constantine with Solomon and Yom Kippur imagery is present in the oration of Eusebius as well.¹⁶

In rebuilding the Temple, Julian intended to undo both elements of the revolution of Constantine. Toward the end of his short reign, Julian's stance toward Christianity appears to have evolved from one of tolerance

¹³ Jewish, Karaite, and Muslim sources report that Byzantine women would send menstrual cloths to Jerusalem to be discarded on the Temple Mount. See Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67.

¹⁴ Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity* (Mohr, 2003), 290–302.

¹⁵ Robert Ousterhout, "The Temple, the Sepulchre, and the Martyrion of the Savior," *Gesta* 29:1 (1990), 44–53.

¹⁶ Michael Alexander Fraser, *The Feast of the Encaenia in the Fourth Century and in the Ancient Liturgical Sources of Jerusalem*, Ph.D thesis, University of Durham, 1996. Accessible via www.encaenia.org, 126.

of the faith, albeit with curtailed influence vis-à-vis paganism, toward one of urgently working to bring about its collapse. Julian was tolerant and fair, and did not wish to engage in violent repression and create martyrs. Early Church writers such as Gregory Nazianzen, Sozomen, and Theodoret note that Julian nonetheless found a way to achieve his aims: Rebuilding the Temple was a bloodless way to demonstrate the falsity of a key prophecy of the founder of Christianity.¹⁷ “And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2). The proposed project—the very laying of its foundations—would facilitate a crisis of faith in Christianity, bringing about its end 365 years after it began, as predicted by the Neoplatonic oracle, Porphyry, and would do more than anything else to allow the revival of the traditional Hellenic religion—or the new, refined, philosophical paganism favored by Julian—in the Roman Empire. It is suggested that the completion of the project was intended for the tenth anniversary of Julian’s appointment as Caesar (Subordinate Co-Emperor in the Byzantine Empire) in 365.¹⁸

In this light, it hardly seems plausible that a project of such magnitude, if begun ceremoniously, should be commenced on a date with no significance. Admittedly, as a dedication ceremony, the Encaenia commemorates the *end* of the construction project, but arguably there was no substantial Christian community in Jerusalem to celebrate its commencement. There are actually varying church traditions regarding the date of the Feast of the Cross, which marks the ostensible start of the project—the *inventio crucis*, the discovery of the true cross by Constantine’s mother Helena Augusta—but the scholarly consensus is that the story is a myth. Nevertheless, the laying of foundations is the more significant event for Julian’s ends, as the placement of “stone upon stone” undoes the Christian prophecy. In addition, from a Jewish perspective, ceremonies are recorded or implied in connection with laying of the foundations of both the first and second Jewish Temples, and so one would expect significance to attach to that of the third as well.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Adler (footnote 1), 31.

¹⁸ Michael Bland Simmons, “The Emperor Julian’s Order to Rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem: A Connection with Oracles?” *ANES* 43 (2006), 68–117. In contrast, J. Lewy (footnote 5) argues that Julian’s project was primarily motivated by idealistic purposes, but agrees that antagonism to Christianity does play a role. The 365 years is said to derive from a promise obtained by Peter from demons upon the sacrifice of a one-solar-year (365-day) old child. See Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 127.

¹⁹ See I Chronicles 28–29, and Yoel Bin Nun, “Yom Yisud Heikhal Hashem,” *Megadim* 12 (1991), 49–97.

TRADITION

In light of the Encaenia, one would not be surprised to find some sort of significance for May 18/Iyyar 18, 363 with regard to both the pagan and the Jewish calendars. It is tempting to link the date of the laying of the cornerstone with the Roman festival of Lemuralia. Lemuralia also occurs in May and represents a ‘cleansing’ from spirits of the dead, allowing marriages to go forward in what was considered by Romans to be an inauspicious period. Julian was an adherent of the Roman cult festivals, and he specifically polemicized against Christianity as corpse-worship.

However, considering the halakhic culture of the fourth century, it seems unlikely that the communities that produced and studied the tractate of *Avoda Zara* would be partner to such a pairing; indeed, the Lemuralia holiday was celebrated on May 9, 11 and 13, not May 18.

Nevertheless, the Jews and Julian may have found common ground with regard to a different festival, the Maiumas, which was celebrated from the night of May 17 (hence Iyyar 18 in 363), a Near-East aquatic fertility festival marked by particular licentiousness and harlotry. Both the ascetic intellectual Julian²⁰ and the rabbis²¹ (with respect to Antioch and the coastal cities of Israel, respectively) polemicized against this festival and, from Julian’s perspective, this project perhaps provided a welcome distraction for the Jewish and pagan communities—much as the dedication of the Holy Sepulcher was intended to distract, detract from, and supersede both *Ludi Romani* and Yom Kippur.

One may perhaps further detect shared anti-Christian sentiment in the choice of Sunday, their day of rest, for this particular activity, just as Constantine selected Saturday for the dedication of this project’s foil.

At the same time, even if it was not intended as an observance of Lemuralia, the choice of Iyyar 18 in the Jewish calendar may indeed reflect the Jews’ sense of relief at having cleansed themselves from the spirit of one particular Jewish deceased: a censored (or self-censored) text reads, “A certain *min* said to R. Hanina: Hast thou heard how old Balaam was? — He replied: It is not actually stated, but since it is written, ‘Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days’, [it follows that] he was 33 or 34 years old. He rejoined: Thou hast said correctly; I personally have seen Balaam’s Chronicle, in which it is stated: Balaam the lame was 33 years old when Phinehas the Robber killed him” (*Sanhedrin* 106b). A parallel text, appearing in a version of the *Toledot Yeshu*, chronicles:

²⁰ Geoffrey Greatrex and John W. Watt, “One, Two or Three Feasts? The Brytae, the Maiuma and the May Festival at Edessa,” *Oriens Christianus* 83 (1999), 1–21.

²¹ Emmanuel Friedheim, “Hilaria: On the Historical Meaning of a Pagan Celebration Mentioned in Land of Israel Midrashim,” *Judaism* 64 (2008), 118–135.

“...and his defilement [meaning, the days of his life] lasted 33 years and no more, and it was fulfilled in him the verse ‘Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days’.”²²

We thus have evidence that, from the time of the early Amoraic period in the Land of Israel, Jews were aware of a Christian tradition that Jesus was killed at the hands of Pontius Pilate at the age of 33. Given that the Omer period represents the first 50 days of the *yemot ba-Hama*—the “days of the sun,” a potent symbol for Christendom, particularly in fourth-century Jewish literature²³—the 33rd day is an auspicious time to mark the cessation of the stranglehold that the Church held over the Holy Land, Jerusalem, and Jewish destiny, and the emergence of the moon, which “can be seen by day and by night,” according to *Pesikta Rabbati*.²⁴ Perhaps, just perhaps, this is what motivated—for the Jews—the selection of this date for the cornerstone-laying of the Divine sanctuary.

The Afterlife of the Day of Dedication: From Yom Tov to Evel and Back Again

In later texts, Iyyar 18 becomes known as “the death of Joshua.” Jesus’s Hebrew name, Yeshua, is simply a Second-Temple variant of the name Joshua. The preeminent church leaders in fourth-century Byzantine Palestine (Eusebius of Caesaria, then Cyril of Jerusalem) follow the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen) in drawing extensive parallels between the two figures, particularly for the use in supersessionist anti-Jewish polemic. Cyril, a central figure in the drama of 363, is particularly notable for expounding the following parallel: “With a loud noise alone, from him that is a type [of Christ], the walls of Jericho fell; and through the speech of Iesu [Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 19:44], ‘There will not even be left one stone upon another,’ down fell the temple of the Jews opposite us.”²⁵ Scholars note that the rabbis were aware of these uses, and responded to many of these obliquely through unusual Aggadic passages in the Midrash and Talmud, which paint Joshua in a surprisingly negative or subordinate light.

When Julian died in battle and was succeeded by the Christian Jovian, it became clear that the “sighting of the moon” was in error. At that

²² Heikhal Shlomo, manuscript version Slavic A4.

²³ *Pesikta Rabbati*, chapter 15.

²⁴ 363 CE also would seem to have further significance as it represents the 330th year after the crucifixion. However, the ‘Anno Domini’ dating system was invented by Dionysus Exiguus in 525 and it is not certain that his method of dating the life of Jesus was shared by his predecessors.

²⁵ Catecheses 10:1.

point, two fast days became inscribed on the wall of the fifth-century synagogue of Rehov:²⁶ Sivan 27²⁷ (or, as known in Syriac, the month of Haziran), the Julian date of the night that the Byzantine Cyrus met his premature end; and Iyyar 18. The memory of those who gave their lives in the earthquake to lay the foundations that came to naught is paired with what *paytanim* would describe as “*mot Yehoshua*” (death of Joshua)—named for the reality that they and their desolate mountain would continue to be haunted by the crucifixion of so-called “Joshua son of Nun,” Jesus son of the “fish,” and the basilica built upon his grave. The Rehov wall nonetheless includes the parallel (Babylonian) tradition of the fast of Nissan 27, for the death of (the authentic?) Joshua son of Nun. Much later, a medieval composite Italian manuscript that includes both dates assigns Nisan 27 to the death of Joshua, and of Iyyar 18 writes simply, “upon it, they decreed a fast.”²⁸

Understood in its original polemical context, the events of 363 were likely ‘radioactive’ for Jews living under Byzantine rule. The intentions of Julian’s Temple were clearly not merely, or even primarily, the redemption of the Jews, but rather the defeat and dismantlement of Christianity. As such, references in Jewish literature under Christendom were necessarily oblique, and commemorative observances needed to be presented in code. To the extent that the true significance of “*mot Yehoshua*” remained known to some, it needed to remain concealed among the masses of Jews under Christendom; the sensitivity of the subject did not recede with time. Indeed, some scholars accept Raoul Glaber’s assertion that the very first massacres of Jews in Western Europe in 1010 resulted from the arrival of news of Caliph Al-Hakim’s destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher—which, naturally, was blamed on the Jews.²⁹

²⁶ Haggai Misgav, “The List of Fast Days from the Synagogue of Rehov,” *IMLA* 7 (2015) 14–23.

²⁷ *Megillat Ta’anit Batra*, the later Babylonian scroll of fasts, attributes this date to the martyrdom of R. Hanina ben Teradyon, but as an early treatment of this genre asks, “Why were these anniversaries of days of death selected for commemoration, and not others?... Why was the martyrdom of R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim commemorated, and not that of R. Judah ben Baba?” See Sid Z. Leiman, “The Scroll of Fast: The Ninth of Tebeth,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 74:2 (1983), 174–195.

²⁸ See Elizur (footnote 11), 141, 144.

²⁹ See discussion in Richard Landes, “What Happens when Jesus Doesn’t Come: Jewish and Christian Relations in Apocalyptic Time,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14:1 (2002), 241–274. Landes traces the roots of modern antisemitism to this event. See Robert Chazan, “1007–1012: Initial Crisis for Northern European Jewry,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 38–39 (1970–1971), 101–117 for an opposing view.

Is it plausible that the memory of these events was preserved among some Jews in Byzantine Palestine and transmitted to Medieval Ashkenaz, even as it was obscured within any canonical texts? The history of the *Toledot Yeshu* traditions suggests that something of this nature is possible. Contemporary research indicates that this mostly orally transmitted Jewish folk counter-history of the life of Jesus—which is cited by Rashi, and circulated quietly among Jews until the modern period—has its origins in the late-antique to early-medieval period, possibly as early as second-century Palestine.³⁰ It contains traditions that evoked responses in Christian apocalypses in the second to fifth century³¹ and draws upon the same sources as the Pseudoclementine literature, which themselves may date to the reign of Julian³² or earlier. Some versions of *Toledot Yeshu* include Jewish responses to the character of Helena Augusta (in some versions conflated with Helene of Adiabene) and even the *inventio crucis* story, which dates to just four decades before the events of 363. Nonetheless, despite its early provenance and widespread popularity, there are fewer than ten manuscripts that can be dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, aside from Geniza fragments; it was transmitted with attention to secrecy until the early modern period.³³ So perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that the drama of the Julian Temple inauguration had a similar orally transmitted afterlife.

A Final Twist: Julian's Arab Heirs

Ultimately, change did come. Upon his conquest of Jerusalem in 637–638, Caliph Umar ibn Khattab had initially acceded to Christian demands that Jews continued to be barred from the city. However, Umar's agreement was soon renegotiated, and Jews were admitted. His successors assiduously cleared the Mount of centuries of trash and restored its platform. The completion of the Dome of the Rock by Abd el-Malik around the turn of the eighth century signified, more than anything else, the supersession of Constantine's Jerusalem. Built on the architectural model of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher itself—just as the latter was built on

³⁰ See discussion in *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, vol. 1, eds. Michael Meerson and Peter Schafer (Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 3–18.

³¹ Pierluigi Piovanelli, “The Toledot Yeshu and Christian Apocryphal Literature,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited*, eds. Peter Schafer, et al. (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 89–100.

³² Nicole Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines* (Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

³³ Yaacov Deutsch, “The Second Life of Jesus: Christian Reception,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited*, 284.

TRADITION

the model of the Temple!—but towering above it, the Dome’s upper walls are inscribed in gold leaf with Koranic passages that polemicize against the virgin birth and Jesus’ divinity. Its very presence as a built structure on the Temple site gave lie to Jesus’ prophecy and reverted the New Jerusalem-Old Jerusalem paradigm, now in favor of Islam. The theological crisis that ensued was so acute that it served as the inspiration for Christian apocalypse literature.³⁴ While Jews held out great hope for the new conquerors, Jewish apocalyptic imagination remained fixated on Christendom, perhaps due to the large numbers of Christian populations who remained, or perhaps to a concern regarding the temporary nature of the reign of Islam.³⁵ *Sefer Zerubavel* predicts the messianic advent after the Byzantine reversal of the Sassanid invasion and fails to anticipate the Islamic conquest a few short years later; it should have been rendered obsolete within a decade of its publication, but it enjoyed a long afterlife and (along with *Toledot Yeshu*) remained popular in Islamic lands. Change of mindset came slowly. But with Umar, and then Abd el-Malik, “*mot Yehoshua*” lost its reason to fast and mourn. On the contrary, its polemical promise was fulfilled, and perhaps this was not lost on those who had perpetuated its memory.

A new apocalyptic work, entitled *Nistarot de-Rabi Shimon bar Yohai*, finally appeared around the mid-eighth century (this time pseudepigraphically attributed to Bar Yohai, in his role as the most bitter rabbinic enemy of Rome), which treats the Islamic conquest frontally, judging the Umayyad rulers’ advent and acts mostly approvingly. The author predicts that the Ishmaelite regime would decisively vanquish Christendom, build a structure for Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount (in some versions), and provide the fertile ground upon which the Messiah would sprout. Many centuries later, the holiday of Iyyar 18 would come to be associated with Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Scholars tend to assume that this association was invented by late Kabbalists, and represents the reappropriation of a prior pilgrimage to the graves of Hillel and Shammai on Iyyar 14, or Nebi Samuel on Iyyar 28. However, one innovative approach suggests that Shimon bar Yohai came to replace none other than Joshua as the prototypical Galilean hero, and the burial site in Meron had previously been associated by some with Joshua (whose gravesite was ostensibly

³⁴ Sidney Harrison Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 32–33.

³⁵ Philip Alexander, “The Toledot Yeshu in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited*, 141.

visited by some among those who took “Joshua” at face value).³⁶ In light of *Nistarot de-Rabi Shimon*, one wonders if Iyyar 18, this day of defiance against Christendom, was seen as a natural time for Jews, now under Islamic rule, to visit the ostensible visionary for their epoch and pray for the complete fulfillment of Julian’s promise, which Bar Yohai predicted.

Christendom Returns—But Not Christian Jerusalem

The Constantinian Jerusalem never was reconstituted. Ironically, when the Crusaders arrived in 1099, they believed that the Dome of the Rock—so similar in structure to the Holy Sepulcher, which in turn mimicked the Temple—was *Templum Domini*, “the Temple of the Lord,” built by a Byzantine emperor or Solomon himself. Thus rather than pull it down, they converted it into a Latin Christian Church, and it served as such until the conquest of Saladin in 1187. Medieval Christian art based on pilgrim accounts continued to represent the Dome of the Rock as the built Temple of Solomon for centuries after.³⁷ To be sure, the grand predictions of *Nistarot de-Rabi Shimon bar Yohai* remained unfulfilled, but the Jews were no longer an object of contempt, their sacred Mount no longer held up as a desecrated ruin in the shadow of the Holy Sepulcher. And just perhaps, at some point, under the noses of their Christian rulers, European Jews in the 8–11th centuries took note of the reversal of Jerusalem’s fortunes, of the removal of the shadow of the Church over the Temple Mount, of the leap forward in the redemptive process—and succeeded in restoring something of the celebratory nature of the Julian Temple dedication, of “*mot Yehoshua*,” to the 33rd day of the Omer.

By the High Middle Ages, Christians clearly forgot the Constantine-Julian contestation. But did the Jews? Perhaps not all. A fascinating passage—authored by the same sixteenth-century Kabbalist whose text is the first to connect Bar Yohai with the day—portrays *Lag ba-Omer* as uniquely incompatible with *Nahem*, the key liturgical lament regarding the Byzantine degradation of Jerusalem.

And also the great Rabbi Abraham ha-Levi (Berukhim) testified, that in the aforementioned year he too went [to Meron on *Lag ba-Omer*], and it had been his practice to recite, in the [Amida blessing] “Dwell...”

³⁶ Elchanan Reiner, “From Joshua Through Jesus to Simeon bar Yohai: Towards a Typology of Galilean Heroes,” in *Jesus Among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl (Routledge, 2012), 94–105.

³⁷ Kathryn Blair Moore, “Textual Transmission and Pictorial Transformations: The Post-Crusade Image of the Dome of the Rock in Italy,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010), 51–78.

TRADITION

“Console (*nahem*) Lord our God the mourners of Zion etc.,” and also when he was there he recited *nahem*, etc. And after he completed the Amida, my master [R. Isaac Luria] of blessed memory said to him, that he saw, awake, R. Shimon bar Yohai, peace be upon him, standing upon his grave, and he said to him, tell this man Abraham ha-Levi, for why did he say *nahem* on our day of joy? And therefore he will be in consolation soon,” and a month did not go by until one son died and he received consolation upon him.³⁸

In sum, a new possibility for the history of *Lag ba-Omer* suggests itself. While admittedly speculative, I believe both Julian and the Jews of Antioch consciously chose the date. While Julian may have meant to eclipse the wild pagan Maiuma, for the Jews it is possible that the choosing the 33rd day of the Omer for the laying of the third Temple’s cornerstone is a hint to pre-existing traditions regarding the death age of Jesus. Indeed, the project was intended (at least by Julian) to spell the death of Christianity, which had invested so much theological capital in the Temple’s eternal ruin. Clearly, for Jews, the day was to be a celebratory one—not merely for the anticipated Temple, but because the very act of laying the foundations would serve to lift the disgrace that was Byzantine Jerusalem by laying “stone upon stone,” in contravention of the prophecy in the gospels.

When the project was derailed—either on the day itself due to an earthquake, or a month later, when Julian died—it was decided that the date was to be a fast day to mourn the lost opportunity; but the true intent of the fast had to be concealed under Byzantine rule, under which mourning the failure of a Jewish-Pagan plot to topple the state religion might not be viewed kindly. Hence was the date represented as Iyyar 18, rather than the 33rd day of the Omer; and the “*yahrzeit* of Joshua” became a thinly veiled shorthand for the demise that was supposed to be celebrated but now mourned, since the hand of Christendom prevailed.

Sometime after the Islamic conquest, when the entire theologically charged architecture of Byzantine Jerusalem was reworked by the Muslims, when the Temple Mount was cleared and the Dome of the Rock was built—possibly initially as a Jewish prayer place, but certainly as an anti-Christian polemical structure—the city ceased to be as the Byzantine Jerusalem described in *Nahem*, “bereft of her children, destroyed of her buildings, scorned of her glory, and desolate of her inhabitants, she sits with her head covered....” When the Jews finally realized that Ishmael remained dominant and Edom was not about to stage a triumphant return,

³⁸ R. Hayyim Vital, *Etz Hayyim, Sha’ar ha-Kavanot, Sefirat ha-Omer*, #12.

the proximate cause for *tzom Yehoshua* (Fast of Joshua) was overturned, and it reverted to be celebrated as originally intended, as *Lag ba-Omer*. Jews had preserved the memory of the events of 363, as evidenced by seventh-century mentions of the earthquake, and were now free to celebrate the event openly. The work that happens to approvingly “predict” the construction of the Muslims on the Temple Mount that was responsible for this reversal is pseudepigraphically attributed to none other than R. Shimon bar Yohai. Thus *Lag ba-Omer* is absent from Babylonian sources, yet reaches Ashkenaz in the twelfth century as a known holiday, not as some new innovation—if by then, in the absence of canonical records of the Julian episode in rabbinic literature, its rationale had receded from memory. And yet, perhaps one hears a faint echo in the Kabbalistic reinvention of the holiday on the soil of the Holy Land, in which the augur of Julianic fulfillment of the dreams of Zion itself becomes its proxy for the Temple’s pilgrimages and offerings.³⁹

³⁹ I am grateful to Prof. David Berger for his comments and insights. Thanks as well to Prof. Joshua Berman, Dr. Tzvi Doron, Mark Faber, R. Arie Folger, R. Uri Goldstein, Shimmy Kreditor, R. Avi Pollak, and R. Yehuda Rock for their feedback on earlier drafts.