

Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity

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Introduction

In the middle of the thirteenth century, the Dominican monk James de Voragine (Iacopo da Varazze, c. 1230-1298) compiled his famous *Legenda aurea* (the ‘Golden Legend’). This immensely influential work, of which almost 1000 medieval Latin manuscripts survive and which was translated into many vernaculars, consisted of a collection of saints’ lives and short treatises on the Christian festivals in 175 chapters. In ch. 24, James tells us the famous story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.¹ Briefly summarized it runs as follows:

During the persecution of Christians by the emperor Decius (ca. 250 CE), seven pious young men took refuge in a cave near Ephesus where they fell asleep and were walled up by Decius. When they woke up, initially they thought they had slept only for a short time and sent one of their number, Iamblichus, to the market to get some food. But as he came into the city, everything appeared strange to him: the buildings were changed, Jesus Christ was being talked about freely by the people, and crosses were inscribed on all the city gates. He couldn’t believe that this was his Ephesus. Finally he realized that it was no less than 372 years later: Theodosius was the Emperor. (Curiously enough, this is said to have happened not about 622 CE but in the reign of the Emperor Theodosius, either I or II [379-395 and 408-450 CE respectively]). The appearance of the seven young men became the occasion for great ecclesiastical festivity in which also the Emperor participated. All who saw the young men thanked God for the miracle. The cave became a much visited pilgrim site for many centuries.²

¹ R. Pillinger, ‘Siebenschläfer,’ *RGG* 7 (2004) 1306. The literature on this subject is vast.

² An English translation is W. G. Ryan, *Jacobus de Voragine: The Golden Legend* (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The Latin text is easily accessible (with a German translation) in R. Nickel, *Jacobus de Voragine: Legenda aurea* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988) 250-263. On the cave and the basilica that was later built on the site see H. Leclercq, ‘Sept dormants d’Éphèse,’ *DACL* 15/1 (1950) 1251-1262.

When James of Voragine penned this legend of a miraculously long sleep of pious persons, this story, or rather such stories, already had a long prehistory of more than one and a half thousand years. We find it in pagan Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim versions. Due to the enormous influence of the *Legenda aurea*, the story became widely known in medieval Europe. It is the purpose of my paper, however, to trace back this motif of persons falling asleep and finding the world completely changed after waking up, from the *Legenda aurea* back into time as far as we can get and to try to reconstruct its *Werdegang*.

Graeco-Roman sources

The early third-century CE account by Diogenes Laertius of the 57-years sleep of Epimenides (1.109; we will come back to this text) is the best known and most often quoted Greek testimony to this motif. However, as the author of the first major scholarly monograph on this subject,³ John Koch, already observed as far back as 130 years ago, it is Aristotle who is the first to briefly allude to stories about long-sleepers. In his *Physics*, he engages in a very subtle discussion of what exactly time is. In that context he says,

Time does not exist without change, for when the state of our mind does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not think that time has elapsed any more than those who are fabled to sleep among the heroes of Sardinia do when they are awakened; for they connect the earlier ‘now’ with the later and make them one, cutting out the interval because of their failure to notice it (*Physics* 4.11, 218b23-26).

Unsatisfactory though this remark may be for us because of its tantalizing briefness— we want to know the precise contents of this legend⁴ – it is important for our purposes that it

³ J. Koch, *Die Siebenschläferlegende, ihr Ursprung und ihre Verbreitung. Eine mythologisch-literaturgeschichtliche Studie* (Leipzig: Reissner, 1883). In spite of the fact that the author overlooked some of the ancient sources, especially Jewish ones, and offers some hard-to-follow explications of the evidence, it is still unsurpassed as the first critical survey of the ancient evidence. This book was recently republished (reprinted) in the USA (no place, no year, no publisher; ISBN 9781148395272).

⁴ As H. Wagner remarks, it is impossible to know in which form Aristotle knew the legend of the Sardinian long-sleepers; see his *Aristoteles: Physikvorlesung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1972) 571, but his commentator

clearly shows that by the end of the fourth century BCE stories were being circulated about people who slept apparently long enough to be useful to Aristotle's argument about the impossibility of the passing of time without change occurring. He is evidently not talking about regular sleep here. And, as we shall presently see, the fact that the story about Epimenides as a long-sleeper in Diogenes Laertius goes back to much earlier sources, makes it very probable that Greek stories about long-sleepers existed already in pre-Christian, perhaps even in pre-Hellenistic times. Although Diogenes only vaguely says that the sources for his chapters on Epimenides were "Theopompus and many other writers" (1.109), it may be taken to be a fact that most of his sources were from the Hellenistic period (Theopompus lived in the fourth century BCE).⁵ What he tells us about Epimenides, who supposedly lived in the decades around 600 BCE, is the following:

[Epimenides] was a native of Cnossos in Crete, although, because of his long hair, he did not look like a Cretan. One day he was sent into the country by his father to look for a stray sheep, and at noon he turned aside out of the way and went to sleep in a cave, where he slept for fifty-seven years. After this he got up and went in search of the sheep, thinking he had been asleep only for a short time. And when he could not find it, he came to the farm and found everything changed and another owner in possession. Then he went back to the town in utter perplexity, and there, on entering his own house, he fell in with people who wanted to know who he was. At length he found his younger brother, now an old man, and learnt the truth from him. So he became famous throughout Greece and was believed to be especially loved by the gods (*theophilestatos*) (Diog. Laert. 1.109; transl. R.D. Hicks in LCL).

Philoponus says that the myth was that 'certain sick people went to the heroes in Sardinia and were treated, and slept for five days, of which they had no recollection when they awoke' (thus W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Physics* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936] 597 with reference to Simplicius, *Comm. in Arist.* IV 338b). See also E. Rohde, 'Sardinische Sage von den Neunenschläfern,' in his *Kleine Schriften* II (Tübingen: Mohr, 1901) 197-208; M. Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern. Eine literarische Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Harassowitz, 1910) 384-387; J.H. Waszink, *Tertulliani de anima* (Amsterdam: Meulenhof, 1947) 516.

⁵ On the sources for our knowledge of Epimenides see H. Diels & W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951 [repr. 1996]), 27-37 (no. 3). Our text is 3A1 D-K. Diogenes' latest source was probably Phlegon of Tralles of the early second century CE.

The final word, *theophilestatos*, is very important. It indicates that Epimenides' ability to sleep extremely long and survive without food and drink was a special divine favour, a motif that will recur time and again as we shall see. That Diogenes did not invent the story of Epimenides' long sleep is proved by the fact that half a century earlier, the great geographer Pausanias states very briefly in passing that 'people say' (*legousin*) that Epimenides slept for forty years in a cave (*Geogr.* 1.14.4).⁶ So the motif is older than Pausanias and most probably dates back to the Hellenistic period. We can be rather sure of that because in the middle of the first century CE, Pliny the Elder states that he learnt about a *tradition* concerning Epimenides' long sleep. He regards it as a fabulous invention (*fabulositas*), but he nevertheless reports the tradition that Epimenides, "when a boy, being weary with the heat and with travel, slept in a cave for 57 years, and when he woke, just as if it had been on the following day, was surprised at the appearance of things and the change in them" (*Nat. hist.* 7.175).⁷ The origins of the motif remain shrouded in darkness, but it is not completely incomprehensible why it was attached to Epimenides. Like the semi-legendary and mysterious Greek traveler, poet, and miracle-worker Aristeas of Proconnesus,⁸ Epimenides, a poet, a holy man, supposed to have been called in to purify Athens after a sacrilegious event, is a very shadowy figure of the late seventh century BCE. The traditions about him were "quickly obscured by legends and miraculous tales"⁹ concerning his out-of-the-body experiences, his oracular capacities, his extreme old age (157 or 299 years), his amazing asceticism, his purifying activities, etc.¹⁰ Since tradition assimilated him to the type of a shaman, the story about his long sleep at the beginning of his saga suggests that 'the Greeks had heard of the long "retreat" which is the shaman's novitiate and is sometimes largely

⁶ In roughly the same period, Maximus of Tyre alludes to "a tale hard to credit if taken at face value ... that he [Epimenides] had lain for many years in a deep sleep in the cave of Dictaeon Zeus" (*Or.* 10.1; cf. 38.3).

⁷ See the note in R. König, *Plinius Secundus d. Ä.: Naturkunde, Buch VII* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1996) 223.

⁸ See J.D.P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). At p. 156, Bolton calls Epimenides 'the prince of cataleptics.'

⁹ A.H. Griffiths, 'Epimenides,' *OCD* (1996) 546.

¹⁰ See E. Rohde, *Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961 [orig. 1898]), vol. 2, 96-99; E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951) 141-146.

spent in a condition of sleep or trance.’¹¹ Be that as it may, for our purposes it suffices to establish that the first time the motif of an excessively long sleep surfaces in classical sources, it is in connection with a person who lives in close contact with the supernatural world and is apparently favoured by the divinities who live there.

Jewish sources

We see this again when we turn to the Jewish material. The earliest occurrence of our motif is in the so-called *Paralipomena Ieremiae* (or *4 Baruch*), a text most scholars agree to have been written in the early decades of the second century CE.¹² There we read that, after the Lord had promised Jeremiah before the destruction of Jerusalem to protect and save Abimelech “until I bring back the people to the city” (3.11), Jeremiah sent Abimelech away with the words, “take a basket and go to the estate of Agrippa by the mountain trail; bring a few figs in it and give them to the sick among the people” (3.15). And Abimelech did what he was told, while in the meantime Jerusalem was destroyed by the Chaldaeans. What then follows deserves to be quoted in full since it is the pivotal text for our purposes.¹³

Ch. 5 (1) Abimelech carried the figs in the heat of the day and coming upon a tree, he sat down in its shade to rest a while. And leaning his head on the basket of figs, he fell asleep and slept for sixty-six years, and he was not awakened from his sleep. (2) After these things he awoke from his sleep and said, “I would gladly have slept a little longer; my head is heavy because I did not get enough sleep.” (3) And when he

¹¹ Dodds, *ibid.* 142, with references in note 46 to literature on the long sleeps of the shamans. There he also notes that Diels ingeniously thought that the long sleep of Epimenides was invented to reconcile the chronological inconsistencies in the various tales about Epimenides, but Dodds rightly remarks that if that were the case, long sleeps should have been a very common motif in early Greek history.

¹² See, e.g., J. Herzer, *4 Baruch (Paraleipomena Jeremiou) Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 22; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) xxx-xxxvi. The very close relationship of *Par. Jer.* with the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* also favours an early second century CE dating; see Herzer, *4 Baruch*, xviii and B. Schaller, *Paralipomena Jeremiou* (JSHRZ I/8; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998) 672, 678-681.

¹³ The translation is from Herzer, *4 Baruch*, 13-19, with some slight modifications. See also the translation by S.E. Robinson, ‘4 Baruch,’ in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 413-425. Good bibliography in Schaller, *Paralipomena Jeremiou* 696-710.

uncovered the basket of figs, he found them dripping with their milky sap. (4) And he said, "I want to sleep a little because my head is heavy. (5) But I am afraid that I might fall asleep again and wake up too late and Jeremiah, my father, would have a low opinion of me. For if he were not in a hurry, he would not have sent me today at dawn. (6) So I will get up and proceed in the heat and go to where there is neither heat nor toil every day." (7) So he got up, took the basket of figs and placed it on his shoulders. And he entered Jerusalem, but he did not recognize it, neither the house nor the place nor his own family, and he said, (8) "Blessed be the Lord, for a great trance has come upon me: This is not the city. (9) I lost my way because I came by the mountain trail when I awakened from my sleep. (10) And since my head was heavy because I did not get enough sleep, I lost my way. (11) This is an astonishing thing to say to Jeremiah, 'I lost my way.'" (12) And he went out of the city and when he looked carefully, he saw the landmarks of the city and said, "Indeed, this *is* the city, but I lost my way." (13) And again he went back into the city and searched, but he found no one of his own people. (14) And he said, "Blessed be the Lord, for a great trance has come upon me." (15) And again he went out of the city, and he remained there grieving, for he did not know where to go. (16) And he laid down the basket, saying, "I shall sit here until the Lord lifts this trance from me." (17) And while he was sitting, he saw an old man coming from the field. And Abimelech said to him, "I say to you, old man, what city is this?" And he said to him, "It is Jerusalem." (18) And Abimelech said to him, "Where is Jeremiah the priest, and Baruch the reader, and all the (other) people of this city? For I could not find them." (19) And the old man said to him, "You are from this city, aren't you? (20) You just remembered Jeremiah, seeing that you are asking about him after such a long time. (21) For Jeremiah is in Babylon with the people, for they were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar, and Jeremiah is with them to announce to them the good news and to teach them the word." (22) As soon as Abimelech heard this from the old man, he said, (23) "If you were not an old man, and if it were not improper for a person to upbraid one older than oneself, I would laugh at you and say that you are crazy because you say, 'The people have been taken captive to Babylon.' (24) Had the heavenly torrents descended to them, there would not yet have been time to go to Babylon. (25) For how long has it been since my father Jeremiah sent me to the estate of Agrippa for a few figs so that I might give them to the sick among the people? (26) And I went and brought them, and when I came upon a tree in the

scorching heat of the day, I set down to rest a little and leaned my head on the basket and fell asleep. And when I awoke I uncovered the basket of figs supposing that I was late, and I found the figs dripping with their milky sap, just as I had picked them. And then you say that the people have been taken captive to Babylon? (27) But that you might know, take the figs and see!” (28) And he uncovered the basket of figs for the old man. (29) And he saw them dripping with their milky sap. (30) And when he saw them, the old man said, “O my son, you are a righteous man and God did not want to show you the desolation of the city, so God brought this trance upon you. Behold, it has been sixty-six years today since the people were taken captive to Babylon. (31) But that you may learn, child, that it is true, look at the field and see that the growth of the crops has just begun. Notice also the figs, that their time has not yet come, and understand.” (32) Then Abimelech cried out in a loud voice, saying, “I will bless you, O Lord, God of heaven and earth, the rest of the souls of the righteous in every place.” (33) And to the old man he said, “What month is this?” And he said, “Nisan, and it is the twelfth day.” (34) And taking a few of the figs, he gave them to the old man and said to him, “God will lead you by his light to the city above, Jerusalem.”

This passage is crucial for our investigation and for that reason it deserves some closer scrutiny. Firstly, Abimelech¹⁴ is a biblical name, but our Abimelech does not have anything to do with the biblical persons called by that name (see Gen. 20-21; 26; Judg. 9). There is no doubt that Abimelech is to be identified with the biblical Ebed-Melech,¹⁵ an Ethiopian courtier who saved Jeremiah’s life and received via the prophet God’s promise that he himself would be saved during the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jer. 38.7-13 and 39.15-18). Curiously enough, while the Bible has God promise to Ebed-Melech that even though God is to rescue him, He is going to fulfill his words against the city in his presence, literally,

¹⁴ Unfortunately, I have not been able to consult J. Riaud, ‘Abimélech, personnage-clé des Paralipomèna Jeremiae?’, *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 7 (1981) 163-178.

¹⁵ The LXX renders the name as Abdemelech (only minuscule 534 has Abimelech; see J. Ziegler, *Jeremias* (Septuaginta XV; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) 406.

‘before your eyes’ (*lephanêkha*),¹⁶ the text in *Par. Jer.* 5 has drastically changed that into a rescue scene in which Abimelech does not have to witness anything of the destruction.¹⁷

Secondly, while the stories of Epimenides and Abimelech overlap in the striking motif of their supernaturally long sleep and the unrecognizability of the world after their awakening, almost everything else is different. But these differences (e.g., the non-dramatic setting of the Epimenides story over against the highly dramatic setting of the Abimelech story) should not make us overlook the fact that in both cases the long sleep is regarded as a divine gift, as a favour on the part of heaven.

Thirdly – and now we come to the main problem – the Abimelech story has been presented so far as our first Jewish specimen of the motif of long-sleepers, but is it? Or rather, is it Jewish at all? Let us face the facts: The *Paralipomena Jeremiae* as we have it is a Christian text that has been handed down to us via Christian channels. Like all or most other Jewish pseudepigrapha, our text, too, has undergone Christian editing and redaction. How sure can we be that the Abimelech story does not derive from a Christian hand? This question becomes all the more pressing when we see that there seems to be undeniably Christian usage in this passage, e.g. in 5.21, where it says that Jeremiah is in Babylon with the people “in order to announce to them the good news (literally, to preach the Gospel: *euangelisasthai*) and to teach them the Word” (*katêchêsai ton logon*). And this is exactly what happens in ch. 9, where Jeremiah preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ before he is stoned to death. Is this not enough to disqualify our story as a source for Jewish ideas about long-sleepers?¹⁸ Since we need to answer this question before we can tackle the problem of a possible influence of the Greek Epimenides (or a similar) story on a Jewish tradition, we will first briefly have to survey the evidence.

We have a longer and a shorter version of *Par. Jer.* Of both versions we possess many dozens of manuscripts, in Greek, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Old Church

¹⁶ The sentence with *lephanêkha* is omitted in the LXX; see J. Herzer, *Die Paralipomena Jeremiae* (TSAJ 43; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) 91 n. 257.

¹⁷ For the way this motif found its way into later tradition in *3 Baruch* 1.1 and elsewhere see A. Kulik, *3 Baruch. Greek-Slavonic Apocalypse of Baruch* (CEJL; Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010) 98-99.

¹⁸ Note that P. Bogaert regards the complete Abimelech episode as a Christian interpolation; see his *L'Apocalypse syriaque de Baruch*, vol. 1 (SC 144; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969) 192-195.

Slavonic.¹⁹ All of these are of Christian provenance and all scholars agree about that. Most students of the text regard only the final chapter on Jeremiah's performance as a preacher of the Gospel as a patently Christian addition (and perhaps some other phrases elsewhere in the work as well), but they do regard the main body of the work as definitely Jewish. For instance, Michael Stone stresses that the work is undoubtedly part of the wider Jewish Baruch and Jeremiah literature represented also by the Syriac and Greek Apocalypses of Baruch, the Greek Book of Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, as well as fragments from Qumran (4Q384-385).²⁰ And he adds that the Jewish nature of the original is apparent from many distinctive features. "Thus the approval of sacrifice, the rejection of foreign women, and the attitude to circumcision, to mention only the most prominent, clearly disprove the theory of a Christian original."²¹ This is convincing to my mind. Even though there is good reason to regard also the words about Jeremiah as a preacher of the Gospel in the Abimelech story (5.21) as a Christian interpolation, there is equally good reason in this case not to regard the whole story as a Christian addition to the Jewish *Grundschrift*.²² Abimelech's long sleep does not serve any Christian purpose, and even though we know some ancient Christian writings that do not seem to serve a clear Christian purpose,²³ in this case we have no reason at all to think that the story is such a case in point. The strong emphasis on typically Jewish halachic elements in the *Paralipomena Jeremiae* as a whole makes it an unlikely candidate for Christian propaganda. As a Christian interpolation, the Abimelech

¹⁹ For a good survey see, *inter alios*, A.-M. Denis, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, vol. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 681-718.

²⁰ Also the originally Jewish *Jeremiah Apocryphon* that has been preserved only in Coptic should be mentioned here; see for text and translation K.H. Kuhn, 'A Coptic Jeremiah Apocryphon,' *Le Muséon* 83 (1970) 95-135 and 291-326. Abimelech's miraculous sleep is told in three phases in chs. 12, 22, 38-39.

²¹ M.E. Stone, "Baruch, Rest of the Words of," *EncJud* 4 (1972) 276. Further arguments for a Jewish provenance in Schaller, *Paralipomena Jeremiou* 677-678, who concludes: "Die ParJer sind, wenn nicht alles täuscht, - abgesehen von dem Schlußkapitel – im wesentlichen ein Text genuin jüdischer Herkunft und Prägung."

²² The situation is very different than in the case of, e.g., the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; see M. de Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature* (SVTP 18; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

²³ See J. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?*, (JSJS 105; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

story would simply be pointless. For that reason we must assume that it is from the pen of the Jewish author. Perhaps the fact that none of the Church Fathers makes any reference to the *Paralipomena Jeremiae*²⁴ may be seen as corroborative evidence.

Is there any probability in the suggestion that the Jewish author here has taken over a Greek motif? Even though in the cases of both Epimenides and Abimelech we meet men who are described as especially favoured by a deity, there is no reason to think in terms of Greek influence. Stories of long-sleepers are known from a wide variety of cultures²⁵ and it is reasonable to think that the motif could have sprung up anywhere, independently from other cultures. And that someone who is able to sleep miraculously long can only be enabled to do so by a deity is something that any person in an ancient culture could think up. Moreover, as we shall see, there are a few other Jewish stories about long-sleepers that do not give us much reason to surmise Greek influence. Let us have a brief look at these texts.

They are about the long sleep of Choni the Circle-Drawer (*Choni ha-me'aggel*) and/or his grandson. There are two different stories about Choni as a long-sleeper, both in two not too different versions. The earliest attestation of one of these stories is found in Talmud Yerushalmi, *Ta'anivot* 3.9.66d. There we read that Choni's grandson (or he himself)²⁶ lived shortly before the destruction of the (first!) temple. He went out to a mountain with his workmen, and when it began to rain, he went into a cave where he fell asleep. He remained asleep for seventy years during which the temple was destroyed and rebuilt for the second time. When after seventy years he awoke and left the cave, he found out that the world had completely changed. What had been vineyards now were olive groves, and where there had been olive groves there now grew plants. He asked the people, "What is going on in the world?" And they said, "You don't know what is going on in the world?" He said, "No." They asked him, "Who are you?" And he said, "Choni, the Circle-Drawer." Thereupon they said, "We have heard that whenever you entered the temple court, it would be illuminated." Then he entered (the temple court), and it was illuminated. Thereupon he

²⁴ See Denis, *Introduction*, 690.

²⁵ See the impressive survey in M. Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern. Eine literarische Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Harassowitz, 1910).

²⁶ I will not discuss the question of whether the stories concern Choni or his grandson, for it is apparent that the transfer to the grandson is only a later development that intends to solve chronological problems in the story, to no avail.

quoted about himself the following verse, ‘When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were unto them like those who dream’ (Ps. 126:1). This story is found in almost identical form in the later *Midrash Tehillim* 126.1-2 as well, although it is there told of Choni himself, not of his grandson, which is probably more original.

Whatever the exact reading and translation of the original words of Psalm 126:1²⁷ the point of the quote is clear: Choni interprets the Psalm as referring to the Babylonian exile and applies the words ‘those who dream’ to himself, and if he has been dreaming, he must have slept long enough to see that ‘the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion.’ And that is after seventy years (see Jer. 25:11; 29:10). That Choni did not live during the Babylonian exile but five centuries later apparently did not matter.²⁸

The other story about Choni as a long-sleeper is told in Talmud Bavli, *Ta’anit* 23a, again with an almost literal parallel in *Midrash Tehillim* 126.1-2. It is as follows: R. Jochanan said, “The righteous Choni was troubled all of his life about the meaning of Ps. 126:1 (see the above quote). He said, “Is it possible for a man to lie dreaming for seventy years?” One day, when he was walking on the road, he saw a man planting a carob tree and asked him, “How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?” The man answered, “Seventy years.” Choni then asked, “Are you sure that you will live for seventy years more?” The man replied, “I found [full-grown] carob trees already planted in the earth, and so, like my forefathers planted these for me, I too plant these for my children.” Then he set down to eat and sleep overcame him. As he slept, a rocky hedge enclosed him and hid him from sight. He continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering fruit from the carob tree and he asked him, “Are you the man who planted this tree?” The man replied, “I am his grandson.” Thereupon Choni said, “Now it is certain that I slept for seventy years!” The story then continues by saying (I now briefly summarize) that Choni went to his home, but nobody recognized him or believed that he was Choni Ha-Me’aggel; and the same happened again when he went to the Beth Ha-Midrash: he was not recognized and consequently not given the honour due to him. This hurt him so deeply that he asked God to let him die, and he died. “Either companionship or death.”

²⁷ See the discussion in H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen* (BKAT 15/2; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972) 853-855.

²⁸ See Huber, *Die Wanderlegende* 418: “Vor dem Anachronismus schreckte die Sage eben nicht zurück.”

It is clear that here the occurrence of the motif of a sleep of seventy years is the result of a specific exegesis of Ps. 126:1: The Lord has his people return from exile to Zion and we know from Jeremiah that the exile lasted seventy years. When those who see the returnees appear to the latter like dreamers, it follows – according to this exegesis – that they must have been dreaming, *i.e.*, sleeping for seventy years. So the motif of a miraculously long sleep here receives a biblical basis. That Choni is here the one who receives this divine gift, is not remarkable in view of the fact that in the traditions about him, Choni is always regarded as someone who was God’s favourite (*theophilês!*). As is well-known, his prayers were famous for being extremely powerful and effective (think of the rain stories).²⁹

Now one can argue, of course, that the text of Psalm 126 does not necessarily imply that it is possible to sleep for seventy years, and that is correct. So it might be the case that the exegetical quandary (what does ‘those who dream’ refer to?) was thought by the rabbis to be solvable by taking recourse to a motif from Greek legends about divinely favoured long-sleepers. But that is hard to prove. It is not certain in which period this legend about Choni arose. The historical figure of Choni most probably lived in the first half of the first century BCE, and it is not improbable that legends about him began to flourish soon after his death. But the legend of his long sleep cannot predate the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and it is also not known to Josephus who wrote in the quarter of a century thereafter.³⁰ We can only guess that the Abimelech legend and the Choni legends developed at more or less the same time, around the turn of the first to the second century CE. Whether or not they developed independently from each other is hard to say. Maybe the story began with Choni as the protagonist and was later corrected in order to avoid blatant anachronisms so as to make the more probable figure of Abimelech the prime actor. Or maybe originally Abimelech was the protagonist and Choni attracted the story as a magnet because of his miraculous reputation. We do not know.

There are both major differences and agreements between the Talmudic stories and the one in *4 Baruch*. Let us briefly compare both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli story with *4 Baruch* 5. In both Yerushalmi and *4 Baruch* the setting is the destruction of the Jerusalem

²⁹ For references see A. Büchler, *Types of Palestinian Jewish Piety from 70 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.: The Ancient Pious Men* (New York: Ktav, 1968 [orig. 1922]) 196-264; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973) 69-72.

³⁰ Josephus writes about Choni (in his version called Onias) in *Ant.* 14.22-24.

temple while in the Bavli it is not. But in all three the motif that the world has completely changed is prominent, albeit more so in the Yerushalmi than in the Bavli story. Both Yerushalmi and *4 Baruch* stress that the sleeper was convinced that he had slept only briefly. While in Yerushalmi there is a mountain with a cave, there is no cave in *4 Baruch* (although a mountain is mentioned in 3.10 and 5.9), neither is there in the Bavli version. In the rabbinic stories, Psalm 126 plays an important role, in Yerushalmi only at the end, in Bavli it is the point of departure; in *4 Baruch* it is lacking. Only in the Bavli story does Choni die of grief.³¹ On the whole, the Yerushalmi version is much closer to *4 Baruch* than the Bavli, but the agreements do not warrant a literary dependence. That there is a common dependence on a tradition of Jewish stories that were created after the fall of the temple in 70 CE is, however, obvious. And that a miraculously long sleep during and after the destruction was part of that tradition is beyond doubt. Pierre Bogaert sees it as follows: “L’auteur des *Par. Jer.* avait besoin de souligner le long intervalle de temps qui sépare la prise de Jérusalem de sa reconstruction. Ne pouvant introduire Honi dans son récit sous peine de commettre un anachronisme grossier, il a remplacé ce personnage par un contemporain de Jérémie et de Baruch, Abimélech.”³² That sounds plausible. An ancient story about Choni the miracle worker is taken into service for the explanation of Ps. 126:1, which is interpreted as referring to the return of the exiles after 70 years, but that makes Choni end up in the sixth century BCE. In the *Paralipomena Ieremiou* the more plausible figure of Abimelech, who did live in that century, replaces Choni to solve this problem

Anyway, it is clear that the Yerushalmi story of Choni’s long sleep has a much closer relationship with the Abimelech narrative than does the Epimenides story. Jens Herzer sees the Yerushalmi story as “an intermediary step linking the two [*i.e.*, Greek and Jewish] traditions.”³³ He states, “By comparing the three versions of the motif, it is possible to identify the process by which the narrative was revised to conform to the individual interests of the authors of *y. Ta’anit* [sic] 3:9 and *4 Baruch*. In the *Yerushalmi* version of the tradition, for example, Epimenides’ fifty-seven years is lengthened to the seventy years of the exile, a

³¹ For a more detailed comparison of the three stories see J. Herzer, *4 Baruch*, 86-87; also Huber, *Wanderlegende* 418-426.

³² Bogaert, *L’Apocalypse syriaque* 197-198.

³³ Herzer, *4 Baruch*, 88.

length again changed by the writer of *4 Baruch* to sixty-six years. (...) Thus one can follow an interesting process of reworking a tradition that also provides evidence for knowledge of Greek classical traditions and their reuse in Jewish circles.”³⁴ This is probably a bit too speculative, but an attractive speculation it is.

Christian sources

We now turn to the Christian material.³⁵ I will deal only with the two earliest witnesses of the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, one from the early and one from the late sixth century.³⁶ The first author to tell us the story of the Seven Sleepers is the Syrian bishop Jacob of Sarug (ca. 450-521),³⁷ although he bases himself upon an older source. Also the other early witness, Gregory of Tours (ca. 538-594),³⁸ states that his knowledge of the story comes from a Syriac source.³⁹ Whether the story originated in Syriac- or in Greek-speaking

³⁴ Herzer, *4 Baruch*, 88. In a note (34) Herzer draws attention to the fascinating fact that interest in Epimenides among Christian circles of the late first century CE is evident from the famous quotations in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12.

³⁵ By far the most extensive survey (though somewhat outdated) is still Huber, *Wanderlegende* (1910).

³⁶ I mention only briefly in passing that the otherwise unknown author of the travelogue *De situ terrae sanctae*, known as Theodosius, writes about 525 CE that in Ephesus are *septem fratres dormientes* (in P. Geyer & O. Cuntz, ed., *Itineraria et alia geographica* [CCSL 175; Turnhout: Brepols, 1965] 123). See the comments by H. Donner, *Pilgerfahrt ins Heilige Land. Die ältesten Berichte christlicher Palästina-pilger (1.-7. Jahrhundert)* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980) 220 n. 96. On the reason why the seven sleepers are called ‘brothers’ here see Koch, *Siebenschläferlegende* 85. On the possibility that this passage in Theodosius is a later interpolation see E. Honigmann, “Stephen of Ephesus (April 15, 448 – Oct. 29, 451) and the Legend of the Seven Sleepers,” in his *Patristic Studies* (Studi e Testi 173; Vatican City: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1953) 125-168, here 135.

³⁷ See F. Rilliet, ‘Jakob von Sarug,’ *RAC* 16 (1994) 1217-1227.

³⁸ See B.K. Vollmann, ‘Gregor IV (Gregor von Tours),’ *RAC* 12 (1983) 895-930.

³⁹ Actually, Gregory says (in the final line of his *De gloria martyrum* 95) that this is a story *quam Syro quodam interpretante in Latinum transtulimus*. This does not necessarily imply that the story itself was in Syriac. The Syrian might have translated it for Gregory from Greek. A strong case for a Greek original was made by P. Peeters, “Le texte original de la Passion des Septs Dormants,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 41 (1923) 369-385. That Gregory knew a Syrian interpreter is not strange; there were many contacts between Syria and Western Europe in his time; see Huber, *Wanderlegende* 371-376.

circles is not easy to decide, but it is more than reasonable to assume that both Jacob's story and that of Gregory's Syriac source are based upon a Greek original from the latter half of the fifth century which, unfortunately, is now lost.⁴⁰ Be that as it may, in one of his poetic homilies (or homiletic poems), Jacob of Sarug tells the story of the Seven Sleepers in what is already basically the form in which we learned about it from the much later *Legenda aurea* at the beginning of this paper.⁴¹ For that reason it is not necessary to quote his and other late antique versions of the story *in extenso*. In these versions one finds an enormous variety as regards the names (and even the number) of the long-sleepers, the name of the mountain where they hid in a cave, the name of the city, the number of years that their sleep lasted etc., but the basic storyline remains the same.⁴² Much abbreviated, Jacob's version is as follows:

The Emperor Decius comes to Ephesus and orders everyone to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Some boys of the leading families refuse and go into hiding but they are denounced. Decius orders that they be flogged and kept until he returns. The boys escape and hide in a cave near Ephesus. They take some of their parents' money with them. In the cave they pray to God and God raises up their spirits into heaven and sends a watcher to guard their bodies.⁴³ On his return, Decius the cave's entrance orders to be blocked. When, after the pagan era, God wants to awaken them, a man in need of building materials re-uses the stones at the cave's entrance and the boys are awakened by the daylight. Then they decide to send one of their number, Iamlikha (=Iamblichus), to the city in order to see if Decius has already returned and they give him some small change to buy bread. Iamlikha is utterly surprised to see crosses above the city gates and wonders whether it is really Ephesus. He tries to buy

⁴⁰ Thus also Koch, *Siebenschläferlegende* 2-3, 84-87, and E. Honigmann, "Stephen of Ephesus" 131.

⁴¹ See the edition of the Syriac text in P. Bedjan (ed.), *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, with additional material by S.P. Brock, vol. 6 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 324-330. Brock's English translation can be found in his article "Jacob of Serugh's Poem on the Sleepers of Ephesus," in *"I Sowed Fruits into Hearts" (Odes Sol. 17:13): Festschrift for Professor Michael Lattke* (P. Allen, M. Franzmann, R. Strelan (eds.), Early Christian Studies 12; Strathford: St. Pauls Publications, 2007) 13-30. I owe thanks to Prof. Sebastian Brock for sending me a copy of this article.

⁴² All major and minor variants are discussed in detail in Koch, *Siebenschläferlegende*.

⁴³ The motif that the bodies are kept intact is strongly reminiscent of a remark of Alexander of Aphrodisias (as reported by Simplicius) on Aristotle's story of the Sardinian long-sleepers that *holoklêra diamenein ta sômata*; see Rohde, 'Sardinische Sage' 198 for references.

bread but among the bread-sellers his archaic coins raise the suspicion that he has found some treasure. He denies it but is taken to the bishop, who questions him. He says that he is the son of one of the leading citizens, but he fails to recognize anyone in the crowd who might rescue him. When he asks where Decius is, people think he has gone mad since that would make Decius 372 years old. Then the boy tells the bishop how he and his companions escaped to the mountain to hide in a cave. The people go up to the mountain and the bishop enters the cave where he greets the boys. He sends a message to the Emperor Theodosius, who immediately comes to Ephesus. Theodosius offers to build a shrine on the spot, but the boys decline and say all this has happened to prove the truth of the resurrection. They lie down, the Emperor covers them with his mantle, and again they sleep peacefully, *i.e.*, they die.

The version of Gregory of Tours, written about 590 CE, is much shorter (*De gloria martyrum* 94[95]).⁴⁴ Basically, the story is the same as in Jacob of Sarug, but there are some differences: the number of years the young men slept is given as ‘many’ (not as 372); it is explicitly said that, just before the men woke up again, “the impure heresy of the Sadducees, who denied that there was a resurrection, was spreading”; and after the Emperor entered the cave, the men spoke at length to him about the resurrection.

We will now first look briefly at the circumstances which gave rise to this legend, at least according to a probable historical reconstruction (partly based upon sources later than Jacob and Gregory).⁴⁵ The forties of the fifth century witnessed a revival of the Origenist

⁴⁴ Text in *PL* 71:787-789; better in B. Krusch (ed.), *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis liber in Gloria martyrum* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum volumen 1: *Gregorri episcopi Turonensis Miracula et opera minora*, Hannover: Hahn, 1885) 550-552. Translation in R. van Dam (tr.), *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Translated Texts for Historians; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988) 147-149.

⁴⁵ In the following I rely partly on the study of Honigmann, “Stephen of Ephesus” 142-168. Honigman’s historical reconstruction is mainly based upon the form of the legend found in Zacharias Rhetor, Photius, and the medieval Greek version of Symeon Metaphrastes, printed as *Hypomnemata* in *PG* 115: 437-445, a text Honigman conjectures may go back to Stephen himself because of the (self?-)glorification of ‘the most holy bishop Stephanus’ (see cols. 444-6). See also A. Samellas, *Death in the Eastern Mediterranean (50-600 A.D.)*. *The Christianization of the East: An Interpretation* (STAC 12; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 63-67.

controversy that had been more or less at rest since the beginning of that century.⁴⁶ There was a new agitation in favour of the ‘heretical’ ideas of Origen about the bodily resurrection, much to the sorrow of the Emperor Theodosius II. In this situation, in the year 448 CE, Stephen, a priest in Ephesus, usurped the episcopal see of the city after having thrown the previous bishop into prison. The legitimacy of Stephen’s episcopate was very doubtful and at the council of Chalcedon in 451 Stephen was still rebuked and finally deposed for this unlawful action. In order to strengthen and consolidate his position he attempted a stratagem shortly after his usurpation. He would try to make his bishopric the scene of a spectacular discovery, of a miracle which would be unparalleled in history, reserving for himself the role of a great spiritual leader who thus refuted the new Origenists and made an end to the doctrinal uncertainty. So he invented and spread an impressive story about the seven pious sleepers *ad maiorem gloriam Stephani* and interpreted the whole ‘event’ as a corroboration on God’s part of the orthodox doctrine of the bodily resurrection. It is hard to see how he could convince his own people of the reliability of the story, but something ‘miraculous’ must have happened because archaeologists have proved that the building of the great church on the spot of the cave had begun by the middle of the fifth century, so immediately after the ‘event,’ whatever that may have been.⁴⁷ Was it a chance find of some well preserved bodies in a cave, following which Stephen exploited this ‘miracle’? Or should we believe Ernest Honigman who argues: “It seems incontestable that about the middle of the fifth century seven young Ephesians really believed or tried to make others believe that they had been persecuted at the time of Decius.”⁴⁸ If so, it is impossible to say whether they had been instructed to do so by bishop Stephen, but that he used the story to secure his own position seems certain. But much remains uncertain here.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See E.A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷ Moreover, the earliest surviving Syriac manuscript containing the story dates to a period no later than around 500 CE; see Brock, “Jacob of Serugh’s Poem” 14.

⁴⁸ Honigmann, “Stephen of Ephesus” 142.

⁴⁹ That Stephen’s name does not occur in most preserved versions of the story is because he was edited out after his condemnation at the council of Chalcedon of 451.

If we assume that the Abimelech story, with its setting in the First Temple period, is of Jewish origin, which seems almost certain, we cannot but conclude that the Christian originator(s) of the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus knew this story and borrowed heavily from it.⁵⁰ What both stories have in common is, first, the setting in a period of great upheaval: the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon on the one hand and the persecution of the Christians by Decius on the other. Second, there is the central motif of falling asleep, which happens in or near a mountain. Third, there is the element of the return to the city after the sleep, followed – fourth – by the utter amazement about the total change of the world which has become well-nigh unrecognizable. Fifth, there is a dialogue between the sleeper and the inhabitants of the city. Sixth, both Abimelech and Iamblichus begin to wonder whether they have lost their wits. Finally, it seems that even the names of the protagonists are related: *Abimelech* and *Iamblichus* (or *Malchus*) have names (*m-l-ch*) that are too similar to go unnoticed. These agreements are too many and too striking to be coincidental! They cannot be explained as deriving from general folklore. We must assume that the creator of the Christian legend knew the Jewish story of the pious long-sleepers. That Christians did know this Jewish story is certain. The proof is that the Abimelech story has been handed down to us only in the christianized form of the *Paralipomena* and the same story is also found in the Christian Coptic translation of the originally Jewish *Jeremiah Apocryphon*.⁵¹ Both writings certainly predate, in their christianized form, the origin of the story of the Seven Sleepers which is to be dated about 450 CE. So knowledge of this Jewish story in Christian circles before the middle of the fifth century is demonstrable.⁵² That its adoption and adaptation in a Christian setting was possibly facilitated by the fact that these Greek Christians perhaps also already knew the story about the miraculously long sleep of Epimenides cannot be proven but cannot be denied either. After all, the Seven Sleepers were, like Epimenides (and, of course, Choni and

⁵⁰ Thus also B. Heller, 'Éléments, parallèles et origine de la légende des Sept Dormants,' *REJ* 49 (1904) 190-218, here 214. On the evidence for Jewish presence in Ephesus in late antiquity see W. Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis II: Kleinasien* (TSAJ 99; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 151-2.

⁵¹ See Kuhn, 'A Coptic Jeremiah Apocryphon,' chs. 12, 22, 38-39.

⁵² Moreover, There was also a Jewish community in Ephesus in late antiquity; see Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis II*, 147-162.

Abimelech), *theophilestatoi*, especially loved by God.⁵³ But that matter must remain uncertain. Certain is only that in the middle of the fifth century CE, Christians in Ephesus saw fit to use a motif they knew from Jewish sources which had been preserved among Christians, and put it into new service for their own purposes. The legend of the Seven Sleepers is nothing but the Abimelech story in Christian dress.⁵⁴

There is also a long and complicated reception history of the legend of the Seven Sleepers in the Islamic world, beginning as early as the Qur'an (Sura 18.8-25), but that falls outside the scope of this paper.⁵⁵

⁵³ Koch, *Siebenschläferlegende* 51, calls the pious long-sleepers "gottbegnadete Wesen."

⁵⁴ This is also the conclusion of Heller, "Éléments" 217: "Nous signalons derrière le décor chrétien le fond juif." Cf. also Huber, *Wanderlegende* 422.

⁵⁵ Most of the Islamic material is dealt with extensively in the monographs by Koch and Huber. Typical for Islam, the Qur'an makes the boys Muslims, not Christians. M. Vogt, "Die Siebenschläfer – Funktion einer Legende", *Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 38 (2004) 223-247, discusses, *inter alia*, the Qur'anic material.

Again, I owe many thanks to my friend Dr. James N. Pankhurst for the correction of my English.