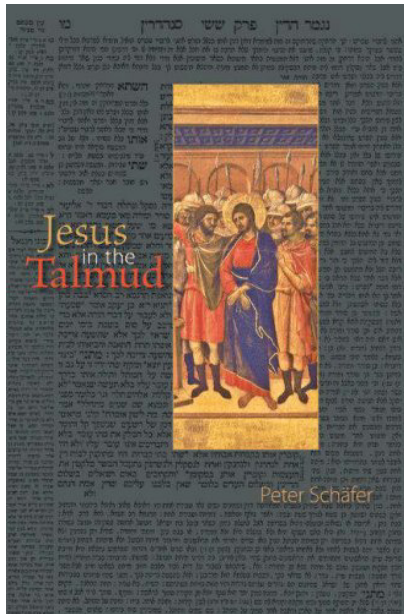


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**Schäfer, Peter**

***Jesus in the Talmud***

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Peter Schäfer deserves great merit for having taken up a subject whose reexamination has been overdue for a long time already and that is of major interest to New Testament scholars, Talmudists, and historians of ancient Judaism alike. Since Johann Maier's German monograph of 1978 (*Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung*), no comprehensive study of rabbinic texts relating to Jesus has been published. Schäfer reexamines all of the available references to Jesus in the manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud and other documents that survived the Christian censureship of the Middle Ages. Against Maier's earlier deconstructive approach, he shows that the rabbinic presentation of Jesus, although not providing historically reliable information on Jesus' life and death, is not a mere fantasy; it is rather of eminent importance for understanding the Jewish intellectual elite's response to the triumphant church of late antiquity. Only from the distance and security of the Babylonian Jewish Diaspora could a direct and fierce assault against Christian claims to Jesus' authority and divinity be launched. This retort can be considered a "counter-Gospel" to the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John.

The new study, which developed out of a Princeton University seminar that Schäfer taught together with Israel Yuval in 2004, is structured thematically, and in this way

roughly parallels the Gospels' arrangement of the Jesus traditions from his birth to his death and resurrection. In his introduction the author stresses, however, that rabbinic references to Jesus are scarce, scattered, and incidental; that is, unlike the authors of the Gospels, the rabbis never bothered to create a comprehensive rebut of the Jew whose aberrant teachings and practices initiated the development of a new religion that rabbis considered idolatry. Nevertheless, their arguments seem to be based on a thorough knowledge of the Christian version of the Jesus story, which they may have learned from the Diatessaron, the Syriac Gospel "harmony" created in the second century, or the most anti-Jewish and christologically explicit Gospel of John.

Through detailed discussions of all of the relevant source materials, Schäfer reveals the rabbinic texts' actual force as "polemical counternarratives that parody the New Testament stories" (9) and that subvert Christian claims to Jesus' Davidic origin, authority as a teacher and healer, execution by representatives of the Roman government, resurrection, and ascent to heaven. In striking contrast to these Christian claims, rabbinic texts present Jesus as the illegitimate child of an adulteress who leads a licentious life and seduces other Jews to idolatry through the practice of magic and blasphemy. He does not find his place in heaven but in hell, where he is condemned to sit eternally in boiling excrement in punishment for his sins.

With regard to each of these issues of the so-called "counter-Gospel" the author tries—in a very sophisticated and complex way—to find literary texts in the New Testament Gospels in which the respective Christian views appear and on which the rabbinic literary response is allegedly based, to support his argument that the rabbinic texts should be seen as "a literary answer to a literary text" (97). Although the emphasis on the literary nature of the rabbinic endeavor is a great advance over Maier's alternative between historical reality and fantasy, here is where one could argue with Schäfer about his interpretation of certain textual details and the reading of some rabbinic texts in connection with other traditions in other documents. For example, can the reference to the sterile mule and unsavory salt in *b. Bek. 8b* really be understood as a "pungent parody" of *Matt 5:13*, where Jesus compares his followers to the "salt of the earth" (23)? When the Babylonian Talmud presents Jesus as a "disciple who publicly spoils his food/dish" (*b. Sanh. 103a*), is it necessary to understand the "dish" in a sexual manner as referring to a licentious life (25)? The "food/dish" could also be the Torah-learning that Jesus subverted in his teaching. The reference to Jesus (introduced with "another interpretation") does not seem to be part of *Rab Hisda's* statement here. Is it therefore appropriate to connect this text with a previously quoted one about adultery (*b. Sanh. 104b*) and claim that "this interpretation comes from the same *Rav Hisda*" (28)? *Mary Magdalene* is not mentioned in the rabbinic allegation about Jesus' spoiling of the dish, but Schäfer suggests that the gnostic Gospel of *Mary Magdalene*, which claims that she was married to Jesus, may be the basis of a

rabbinic reference to his unfaithfulness toward her or to a transgression of sexual purity rules concerning Niddah (29). Especially in the second context, in which the Bavli mentions Jesus' spoiling of the dish (b. Ber. 17a–b), where Torah instruction is at issue, a nonsexual interpretation of the food/dish as a (false interpretation of) the “nourishing” Torah may be more appropriate. Schäfer connects this text with Balaam in m. Sanh. 10:1 instead and suggests that, like Balaam, Jesus has no place in the world to come (33).

Very interesting is the Babylonian Talmud's consistent association of Jesus and Christianity with magic, as stressed by Schäfer. In b. Sanh. 107b Jesus is presented as one of the disciples of Yehoshua b. Perahya and directly accused of practicing magic. Babylonia was the heartland of magic, and both Yehudah b. Perahya and Jesus appear on magic bowls (see 38). Although the story about R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus's encounter with a Jewish sympathizer of Jesus is solely concerned with halakhic argumentation (b. 'Abod. Zar. 16b–17a), another tradition accuses R. Eliezer of relying on magic (b. Ber. 59b): Could this be the real reason for rabbinic opposition to him? Schäfer alleges that “R. Eliezer becomes the rabbinic doppelgänger of Jesus” (51). The association of Jesus and his followers with magic continues in t. Hul. 2:12ff., with parallels in the Yerushalmi and Bavli. R. Ishmael is presented as a fierce opponent of magical healings “in the name of Jesus son of Pantera.” Not the healing practice itself but the authority claimed for Jesus seems to be at issue here. Schäfer surmises that the text should be seen as “an (early) attempt to establish boundaries, to delineate Judaism by eliminating heretics” (60).

Another premier topic of rabbinic polemics against Christianity is the reinterpretation of the death and rejection of the resurrection of Jesus. Whereas the Gospels maintain that Jesus was crucified by representatives of the Roman government, Babylonian rabbis claimed Jewish responsibility for Jesus' execution according to rabbinic law, by stoning and hanging him on Passover eve instead (b. Sanh. 43a). By appropriating the duty of executing Jesus, the rabbinic authors of this text present him as a relatively unimportant Jewish heretic and blasphemer. They counter Christian accusations of Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death by a proud acknowledgement of his deserved punishment. The date of the execution concurs with John 13:1ff., where the Last Supper takes place before Passover. One can argue over Schäfer's allegation of rabbis' actual familiarity with the New Testament texts concerning the date of his execution and his claimed closeness to the government, however (see 72–73). Rabbis may have known about Christian discussions about the date of Jesus' execution from mere hearsay or assumed that it must have been carried out before the Passover holiday, if Jews were the executioners. Jesus' alleged closeness to the government must not be based on the New Testament account of Pilate's attempts to save Jesus and crucify Barnabas instead. The rabbinic authors may rather refer to the status of Christians at their own time, when the rulers themselves were Christian; that is, they may have linked Jesus to the Byzantine government (in John 19:12,

Jews try to distance Jesus from the Roman government instead). It is certainly true, however, that the rabbinic presentation of Jesus' execution is "a complete reversal of the New Testament's message of shame and guilt," "a message that boldly and even aggressively challenges the Christian charges against the Jews as killers of Christ" (74). One may ask whether this reinterpretation was meant for internal rabbinic discourse only or was (also) expressed outside of the study house.

Some manuscripts of *b. Git.* 55b–56a go even one step further and claim that after his death Jesus was punished in hell. By claiming that Jesus was condemned to sit in boiling excrement forever, they created a counterstory to Acts 1:9–11, which mentions Jesus' ascension to heaven after his resurrection. Whether this appalling punishment is merely the most disgusting situation rabbis could think of or is a conscious counterargument against Matt 15:1–20 and its parallels ("what goes into the mouth does not defile a person, but what comes out of it") or the idea of the Eucharist, the symbolic eating of Jesus' flesh and blood (see 91–92) and the notion of Jesus as the "bread of life," remains open to question.

In his conclusions Schäfer is able to show that Jewish accusations of magic were already countered by early Christian writers such as Justin and closely linked to christological issues such as the claimed divinity of Jesus. The accusation of sexual promiscuity was originally directed against Jews and reappears in Justin and Tertullian. That is, the rabbinic association of Christians with immorality and magic seems to have a long tradition and must not necessarily be based on rabbis' knowledge of particular New Testament texts. One could imagine that such counterarguments could have developed orally and be based instead on rumors, hearsay, and observations.

The large majority of the texts that relate to Jesus and refute Christian claims appear in the Babylonian Talmud. This phenomenon is explained by reference to the different situation of Jews in Babylonia, who were detached from the anti-Jewish legislation of the Christian government in Palestine. The geographical distance together with the Sasanian government's anti-Christian policy gave Babylonian rabbis the necessary security to forcefully counterattack Christianity. Thus, according to Schäfer, the *Bavli* reflects the conflict "between Jews and Christians in the very process of defining themselves (i.e., the Christian Church)" (122). The conclusion depends, of course, on the dating of the respective Jesus-texts. Although the earliest manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud in which Jesus appears can be dated to the twelfth century C.E. only, Schäfer assumes (against Maier) that Jesus already appeared in the texts created before the editing of the *Bavli* in the eighth century. There is no guarantee, however, that all of them are Amoraic and contemporary with Sasanian rule.

The great achievement of this book is that it reopens the discussion of texts that are of greatest significance for the study of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in antiquity and the early Middle Ages. It presents the Jewish intellectual elite in a new light, as active respondents to Christian claims and allegations and forceful combatants in the Christian-Jewish dispute.