



Jaffé, Dan

Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme: Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature talmudique

Initiations bibliques

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This book is an introductory study of the emerging Christian movement as viewed from the perspective of emerging rabbinic Judaism. Most of the material stems from Dan Jaffé's earlier work, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme: Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique I^{er}-II^e siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), which provided an exhaustive survey, analysis, and historical contextualization of the talmudic passages relevant to the evolution of relations between the sages and Jewish followers of Jesus, on the one hand, and the relations between the sages and the "people of the land" (*'amei-ha'arets*), on the other. By contrast, this latest work, published in the series *Initiations bibliques* at Cerf, is tailored to the needs of beginning graduate students: a substantial text (accompanied by footnotes that provide access to a vast pool of secondary sources in several languages) that, however, remains eminently readable.

The book opens with an introduction (13–58) describing the sociohistorical context of Judaism in the first two centuries of the common era, guided by the methodological considerations laid out in *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme*. According to the picture sketched out by Jaffé, in the wake of the destruction of the temple the pluriformity of Second Temple Judaism came to an end. Whereas different halakot could formerly

coexist within the same overarching framework of Judaism—inasmuch as general allegiance to the temple ensured a high degree of socioreligious coherence—after 70 C.E. the sages gradually imposed their views: daily prayer, a new liturgy of the feasts, a clarification of the biblical canon (22–27), and, above all, Torah study substituting the temple sacrifice (17). Those who failed to adhere to the new halakah imposed by the sages (now “an ideal in itself” and the single criterion of Judaism [19]) were gradually excluded as heterodox, *minim*. Even though the process was a gradual one, still incomplete as late as the fourth century (131), an evident parting of the ways between the society of the sages and the group of *minim* occurred 70–135 C.E., precipitated by the introduction, toward the end of the first century, of the Birkat Haminin (“the blessing of heretics”—in fact a self-imposed malediction; 19, 40, 130). At least before 135, when the semantic range of term *min* was broadened (134), the targeted *minim* were in particular Jewish followers of Jesus, whose religious practice was indistinguishable from that of other Jews and who posed “an exclusively doctrinal problem” (131, 124–25). Paradoxically, the successful religious marginalization and social exclusion of the *minim*, on the Jewish side, was mirrored by a similar process in mainstream Christianity, which marginalized those who might have entertained correct beliefs but whose practices were deemed too Jewish (129).

In the subsequent chapters, the first three of which are entitled “The Premises of the Schism,” “The Schism Announced,” and “The Schism Accomplished,” Jaffé sketches out the increasingly acrimonious relations between the sages and the emergent Christian movement on the basis of a careful reading of select talmudic texts. The underlying assumption is that talmudic accounts can be legitimately used for historical reconstruction because of their paradigmatic value (53). The first study presents the encounter between Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Jacob the Min. According to this story, in his youth Eliezer had “found pleasure” in discussions with a certain Jacob, follower of Jesus, whose halakic expositions were clearly shaped by Christian beliefs and practices. A few decades later Eliezer was arrested on suspicion of being himself a Christian. This suggests, according to Jaffé, that at an early stage the interaction with followers of Jesus had not been problematic—as reflected in the fact that the young Eliezer “found pleasure” in the expositions of Jacob—whereas later (in the present time of the account, when the old Eliezer voices his regret over the discussion with Jacob decades earlier) alternative explanations of the law had come to be deemed *minut* (heresy) and shunned.

The second chapter comprises stories that warn against recourse to Christian healers: (1) the story of Eleazar ben Dama, who had been bitten by a venomous serpent and was pronounced “blessed” because death prevented him from having recourse to healing “in the name of Joshua ben Pantera”; (2) the story of Yehoshua ben Levi, who expressed his distress over the fact that his child, who had swallowed a bone, was saved from choking death by a healer’s incantations “in the name Yeshu ben Pandira.” According to both

texts, death is preferable to the blasphemy entailed by accepting to be healed in the name of Jesus—a conviction that overrides the sages’ principle of favoring the preservation of life over the strict religious observance, in case of persecutions. Jaffé regards these texts as witnesses to the sages’ attempt to prevent interest in Christian healing practices and their associated doctrinal claims (81).

There follows a detailed study of talmudic references to *gilyon*, *aven-gilyon*, “books of the *minim*,” and *sepharim hitsonim* (“external books”). After careful weighing of the primary sources and a near exhaustive survey of scholarship, mapped out very clearly, Jaffé offers the following judgment: the *gilyonim* refer to Gospel literature (94)—an excellent candidate would be the Gospel of Matthew, which is discussed later (109–20)—while “books of the *minim*” most likely refers not to Torah scrolls copied and used by Christians but rather to other types of “Jewish Christian” literature (100). Presumably this might include the Pauline and deutero-Pauline epistles, the Didache, the Apocalypse of John, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, Ascension of Isaiah, perhaps also various Enochic texts. However, Jaffé insists that no particular text can be identified with precision as a “book of the *minim*” (108). What appears certain is that the sages found it imperative to react in a radical manner against the dissemination in Jewish society of writings produced by followers of Jesus (108). With the shift toward Gentile Christianity, this reaction abated in the second half of the second century (102).

The fourth chapter, narrating the controversy between Rabban Gamaliel, his sister Imma Shalom, and a judge who seems to be quoting from the Gospel of Matthew, is indicative of a stage at which, even though (theological) dialogue between the two groups was not yet “hermetically blocked,” the only possible dialogue was “the dialogue of cynicism” (120).

The fifth is a study of the Birkat Haminim. As noted above, Jaffé views it as a decisive weapon introduced around 80–90 C.E. against Jewish followers of Jesus, which precipitated their religious and social marginalization (20, 121, 125). Echoes of the Birkat Haminim can be detected in the canonical Gospels (Matthew and John), Justin Martyr, Origen, Epiphanius of Salamis, and Jerome (21, 125–29). Jaffé rejects the opinion entertained by scholars such as Stephen T. Katz and, more recently, Liliane Vana, that in the late first and early second centuries the Birkat Haminim did not target Jesus-followers (20 n. 2, 130 n. 1).

In the next two chapters Jaffé discusses the talmudic references or allusions to Jesus and the apostle Paul. The talmudic passage (b. Sanh. 107b) that states that Jesus was rejected by his teacher, Yeshua ben Perahia, and subsequently drifted into idolatry is obviously “legendary,” lacking “even an ounce of authenticity” (150); nevertheless, it witnesses to

the Jewish perspective on Christianity (151). Briefly put, the schism that created the Jesus-movement was the tragic result not only of Jesus' own shortcomings and errors but also of a certain misunderstanding and mishandling of the situation by the religious authorities; nevertheless, Jesus and his followers were rightfully condemned for magic and for the seduction of the Jewish people.

The chapter on possible references to Paul and Pauline doctrines in the Talmud discusses texts that accuse those who do away with circumcision and set forth erroneous interpretation of the Torah. According to Jaffé, the evidence in these texts points to the sages' vehement reaction against the view of the law expounded by the Pauline epistles. However, the thesis of talmudic references specific to the person of Paul (advanced by Harris Hirschberg in the 1940s) is deemed unconvincing (172–73).

The book closes with a chapter entitled "A Jewish Perspective on Jesus" (177–93), which surveys the most important attempts by Jewish historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to treat the subject Jesus of Nazareth with the instruments provided by human sciences. The authors under consideration are Joseph Salvador, Heinrich Graetz, Joseph Klausner, David Flusser, and Geza Vermes. This chapter brings nothing particularly new, but it is certainly useful to its intended readership.

Many readers will find that Jaffé labors under the assumptions of the "old" paradigm so forcefully called into question by Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Indeed, Jaffé retains the historical reliability of the talmudic accounts (e.g., the council of Yavneh; the Birkat Haminim) and the system of relative chronology that allows the ascription of talmudic texts to various sages. In his estimation, these texts do not reflect the views of a minority with little influence over second-century Jewish society and are not merely retrospective fiction in the service of later power legitimation; they are, rather, bearers of a "certain historicity" and stem from the dominant socioreligious elite of that society (37–38, 42–47). Assertions about Yavneh and the Birkat Haminim as legendary, late, and ideologically driven constructs are denounced as speculations that "lack any foundation" (15 n.1).

Nevertheless, Jaffé's every statement rests on the masterful analysis of the sources and solid scholarship displayed fully in his earlier book. Even readers who might not agree with his conclusions will surely benefit from his transparent presentation of alternative proposals, gleaned from Israeli, French, English, and German scholarship of the past decades. Overall, Jaffé aligns himself with the camp of Israeli and French scholars (e.g., Alon, Oppenheimer, Safrai, Urbach, Blanchetière, Mimouni) and is consistently critical of the views expressed by Shaye J. D. Cohen and Daniel Boyarin (15 n. 1, 27 n. 2, 42 n. 2, 45–47). As a matter of fact, his 2005 study also includes critical references to Jacob Neusner.

Readers would also profit from consulting the recent article by Christophe Batsch, “La littérature tannaïtique comme source historique pour l’étude du judaïsme du deuxième temple: Les questions méthodologiques de Jacob Neusner et de Peter Schäfer,” *Revue des Études Juives* 166 (2007): 1–15.

This book will be useful to graduate students in the area of New Testament and Christian origins. Moreover, the text and especially the extensive footnotes allow for an easy transition to Jaffé’s earlier and more extensive study of Jewish-Christian relations in the first three centuries.