Introduction

A PRELUDE: PARIS, 1240

In the summer of 1240, the city of Paris witnessed an unusual trial.[1] The lead prosecutor was Nicholas Donin, an apostate Jew turned Franciscan friar. The defendant, however, was not a person but a set of books. Since converting to Christianity several years earlier, Donin had worked tirelessly to prove his Catholic bona fides by exposing his former coreligionists as enemies of the Church. Having already denounced the Jews for their alleged blasphemies, Donin now set his sights on what he believed was their source. His target was the Babylonian Talmud, the great repository of classical rabbinic learning that stood second only to the Hebrew Scriptures in Judaism's sacred canon.[2] For months Donin had petitioned Pope Gregory IX to investigate the Talmud's rumored crimes against the Christian faith. The trial in Paris was to be a vindication of his efforts, a public exhibition of the guilt of those who conducted their lives in accord with the Talmud's perfidious teachings.

In submitting the Talmud as a work offensive to Christian doctrine, Nicholas Donin took advantage of the Church's habit of disavowing all manner of sacred knowledge alien to the Christian intellectual tradition. That the Talmud belonged to that order was hardly a novel observation on Donin's part. Generations of Christian theologians had traded in rumors of its treachery. Yet the Talmud's contents had remained largely unknown outside of the Jewish academies, its vast pages of Hebrew and Aramaic script forbidding even to the most seasoned Christian readers. Only with the aid of former Jews trained in

[1] For the following, compare Robert Chazan's detailed account of the trial in Friedman et al. (2012: 31–80). A summary overview with extensive bibliography appears in Krauss and Horbury (1995: 153–61).

[2] On perceptions of the Talmud's authority in medieval Jewish culture, see Fishman (2011), especially ibid. (121–54), on the proliferation of Talmudic knowledge in northern Europe during the High Middle Ages.

its study were its mysteries now being brought to light. Fueled by the zeal of the convert, Friar Nicholas was incensed by what he had come to see as the Talmud's stultifying ritual precepts and naked theological falsehoods. Insofar the Jews professed to live by the Talmud's wisdom, Donin now believed, their mere presence in Christian society undermined its ethical constitution.[3]

The unenviable task of defending the Jewish position fell to a panel of four distinguished French rabbis summoned to the court of King Louis IX at the Franciscan's behest. Leading the cause was Rabbi Yeḥiel ben Joseph of Paris, a noted scholar who had known Donin prior to his conversion.

Unfortunately for Yeḥiel and his associates, the trial was a farce. Surviving records of the affair suggest that the rabbis were allowed little more than to entertain Nicholas' audience, to exemplify the disbelief of which he had already persuaded the local ecclesial authorities.[4] Consequently, despite the capable efforts of the venerable Jewish sages to deflect Donin's allegations, theirs was a losing cause from the outset.

While his initial report of its alleged blasphemies certainly misrepresented the whole of the Talmud, Donin's grasp of its content was formidable enough to paint the rabbis into a corner. The friar seized upon Talmudic legislation involving gentiles and heretics, accusing the Jews of using such laws as pretexts for disparaging Christians. He expounded on ancient rabbinic doctrines seemingly at odds with the Catholic catechism. He exulted in the Talmud's rare but damning instances of polemical rhetoric overtly targeting Jesus and his followers. Donin, in short, knew precisely where to strike to exact the greatest damage against his opponents.

Given the effectiveness of their adversary's technique, Rabbi Yeḥiel and his colleagues could not simply deny Donin's charges. The friar had already provided the royal adjudicators a detailed catalogue of the unflattering Talmudic passages at issue.[5] The rabbis had recourse only to argue that those textual selections did not actually mean what Donin claimed they meant, and that the Talmud's polemics in fact were not directed against Christianity.

[3] The foregoing account follows Chazan (1988), who argues that Donin based his charges on controversies current among the Talmud's Jewish readers. Compare, however, J. Cohen (1982: 60–77), who contends that the friar drew chiefly upon traditional Christian polemics against the Talmud. With respect to Cohen, the Talmud's notoriety among certain Christians did not always speak to secure knowledge of its contents; cf. Fishman (2011: 167–74).

[4] Perhaps the best known of these is an elaborate Hebrew account written by Rabbi Yeḥiel several years after the fact. We also have a number of Latin court documents drafted by Donin and his associates. Forgiving the embellishments of each party to the affair, their reports agree with one another frequently enough to permit a fair degree of confidence as to the actualities of the trial. See Krauss and Horbury (1995: 153, n. 18), for the primary sources. For the sake of simplicity, I shall refer to the English translations of the major documents provided in Friedman et al. (2012).

[5] Although the only surviving record of Donin's initial charges was produced several years after the trial, its correspondence with Rabbi Yeḥiel's account of the Talmudic passages cited by the prosecution suggests its general accuracy; see Chazan in Friedman et al. (2012: 16–21).

Yet while this strategy might have worked in some cases, it would not work in all. What of those passages taking direct aim at Jesus? What of the notorious story casting the Christian Messiah as the illegitimate offspring of a Roman soldier?[6] What of the passage condemning Jesus to a hellish eternity submerged in a cauldron of boiling excrement?[7] How, Donin begged his audience, could the rabbis deny the libelous nature of these passages? How, moreover, could Jewish readers who believed the Talmud's lies be permitted to commit such sacrilege?

The rabbis were up against the wall. Even if they had regarded the Talmud as a reliable record of Jesus' life, they could not uphold that position in court. Forced, therefore, to defend their sacred tradition against the indefensible, Yeḥiel and his associates devised a daring rebuttal.[8] The Jesus of the Talmud, they asserted, was not the Jesus of the New Testament. He was, rather, an otherwise unknown Jewish miscreant who happened to share the name of the Christian Messiah. In fact, Yeḥiel submitted, the ancient Jewish sages who authored the Talmud knew of several such Jesuses of no consequence to the Christian faith. He even produced the following Talmudic passage as evidence:

When King Yannai was putting the rabbis to death, Joshua ben Peraḥiah and Jesus fled to Alexandria in Egypt. When there was peace, Shimon ben Shetaḥ wrote to him, "From me, the Holy City, to you, Alexandria in Egypt: Oh sister of mine, my husband dwells with you while I sit abandoned!" So Rabbi Joshua arose to return. He happened upon a certain inn where they showed him great honor. "What a fine inn/innkeeper this is," he proclaimed.[9] "But rabbi," Jesus replied, "her eyes are narrow." "You wretch," Joshua cried, "Is this how you behave?" So he dispatched four hundred trumpets and excommunicated him. Jesus returned to him several times, saying, "Take me back!" But Joshua paid him no mind. One day Jesus approached Joshua while he was reciting the *Shema* prayer. Joshua considered taking Jesus back, and so made a gesture to him with his hand. But Jesus thought he was rebuffing him.[10] So he went and set up a brick and

[6] The passage appears in uncensored manuscripts of *b.Shabbat* 104b and *b.Sanhedrin* 67a, on which see Schäfer (2007: 15–18). It is cited by Yeḥiel (Friedman et al. 2012: 136–37) and the court recorder (ibid., 122).

[7] The passage appears in uncensored manuscripts of *b.Gittin* 56b–57a, on which see Schäfer (2007: 82–90). It is cited by Yeḥiel (Friedman et al. 2012: 135) and the court recorder (ibid., 122).

[8] For the following, see Yeḥiel's account in Friedman et al. (2012: 138–39), and compare the court recorder's account (ibid., 122). Although the Latin document does not explicitly assign the following stratagem to Yeḥiel, its account of the proceeding testimony of his colleague Rabbi Judah ben David of Melun suggests that the latter alluded to a Talmudic passage impugning Jesus "because he derided the words of the wise" (Ms. Paris Lat. 16558, fol. 231c: *quia derridebat verba sapiencium* [sic]; cf. ibid., 124.). Per Chazan (1999: 88–90), it is possible that Yeḥiel collapsed the testimonies of all the Jewish defendants into a singular dialogue for the sake of clarity. I shall proceed to refer to Yeḥiel as the author of the stratagem for lack of a more secure identification.

[9] The Aramaic term *akhsania* typically connotes an inn or a guest house (cf. Greek *xenia*), although the same lexical form is used elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud to refer to a female innkeeper (e.g., *b.Bava Metzi'a* 87a). Hence, Jesus appears to misinterpret his teacher's compliment as referring not to the inn but to its proprietor.

[10] Rabbinic custom dictates that one should avoid interruption while reciting the *Shema* prayer; see *m.Berakhot* 2.1–2; *t.Berakhot* 2.2. The unfortunate timing of Jesus' arrival is thereby implied to

began to worship it. Joshua called to him, "Come back!" But Jesus replied, "So have I learned from you: Anyone who sins and causes others to sin is incapable of repentance." That is why the master said that Jesus the Nazarene practiced magic, deceiving Israel and leading them astray.[11]

At first glance, a story depicting Jesus as a lecherous idolater appears to be an odd choice for the defense. Evidently, moreover, this was not among the incriminating Talmudic passages on which Friar Nicholas predicated his charges.[12] Yeḥiel's decision to adduce the story appears to speak to his appreciation of its chronological confusion. The Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus, here dubbed Yannai, reigned over Judea from 103 to 76 BCE, that is, significantly earlier than the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth. The Pharisaic sages Joshua ben Peraḥiah and Shimon ben Shetaḥ were active during roughly the same era. Rabbi Yeḥiel knew this, and he suspected that Nicholas Donin knew it too.[13] Donin would therefore have had to concede that the subject of the Talmud's condemnation could not possibly have been the Jesus of Christian devotion. Extending that logic to all of its indictments of persons named Jesus, Yeḥiel asserted that not one of them could be proven to refer to their hallowed Christian namesake.

From a contemporary standpoint, the rabbi's gambit seems fairly transparent. Clearly, the author of the Talmudic story meant to caricature the reputed founder of Christianity as an apostate Jew. Yet even if disingenuous, Yeḥiel's argument was no less resourceful. Friar Nicholas had aimed to indict the Talmud for what he perceived as its libelous claims about the Christian Messiah. To the faithful Christians who attended the trial, the Talmud's disparaging remarks about Jesus substantiated the very worst of Donin's accusations. If, as the prosecution contended, the Christian likeness of Jesus was true, the Jewish likeness must be false. Yeḥiel, of course, could not well have denied the truth professed by his opponent. But neither could he debase the Talmud by denying its historicity. He therefore asserted that the Talmud contained truths more numerous and more obscure than Donin had led his audience to believe.

prohibit Joshua from greeting his disciple upon his arrival. Instead, the rabbi manually gestures for Jesus to wait until he finishes reciting the prayer. Jesus, however, misinterprets his teacher's gesture as a signal to shove off.

11 Excerpted from *b.Sanhedrin* 107b and *b.Sotah* 47a, uncensored manuscripts, on which see Schäfer (2007: 34–36). My translation is based on the text of *Sanhedrin* in Ms. Munich Cod. Hebr. 95 as recorded in Rabbinovicz (1868–1897: 9.339–40) with orthographical emendations supplied by the *Sotah* version.

12 The Latin report does not include this passage amidst its list of the Talmud's blasphemies against Jesus (cf. Friedman et al. 2012: 117). Perhaps Donin knew of its potential to confound his case.

13 While it is unclear whether Yeḥiel would have known the precise dates of Jannaeus' reign, he likely reasoned that Donin would have known that the Hasmonean king was no longer in power during first century CE. For further notices of Jannaeus' reign in Talmudic texts, see *b.Berakhot* 48a and *b.Qiddushin* 66a, with discussion in Kalmin (1999: 61–67). See also *m.Avot* 1.6–9, on the relatively early dates of Joshua ben Peraḥiah and Shimon ben Shetaḥ.

That the ancient Jewish sages who authored the Talmud were less preoccupied than Friar Nicholas with biography of Jesus Christ was, in theory, a plausible defense. Yet, needless to say, Yeḥiel's ploy did not help win his case. The official court record indicates that Donin simply dismissed Yeḥiel's logical subterfuge as the very height of his Talmudic sophistry.[14] And so, following the testimonies of the other Jewish luminaries forced to partake in the charade, the trial was brought to an unceremonious close. It would take until May of 1248 for the Vatican to issue its first formal condemnation of the Babylonian Talmud. But by that point the verdict was inconsequential. The intervening years had seen copies of the Talmud and other classical Jewish texts confiscated and burned by the cartload in Paris and throughout the dominion of King Louis. The once thriving rabbinic academies of France were left desolate. With no books at their disposal, their teachers and students had no reason to stay there. Rabbi Yeḥiel was one of many who would decamp for the Holy Land in the wake of the Paris trial.[15] In the end, Nicholas Donin did not succeed in his mission to purge France of its Jews. But he did manage to extinguish their intellectual fire for what would prove a long time to follow.

A JEWISH GOSPEL?

The Paris trial exposed a fault in traditional Jewish discourse of the Christian other. At one time, the Jews of medieval Christendom could take heart in the belief that the faith of their subjugators was nothing more than a base corruption of their own. Where Christians subscribed to the truth of the gospels, Jews professed what they believed was the superior truth of their own sacred books. The legends of the Talmud provided solace to an oppressed minority who needed to know Jesus as a degenerate Jew in order to cope with their abusive existence at the hands of those self-righteous gentiles who professed his teachings. Jews both ignorant and educated circulated these and other such condescending biographical fictions in the *Toledot Yeshu*, or the "Chronicles of Jesus," a wildly popular Hebrew parody of the Christian gospels.[16] In a sense, they had to. Satirizing the Christian majority by undermining their collective sense of self was a crucial, if sometimes crass, mechanism of Jewish survival.[17]

[14] Friedman et al. (2012: 122). Yeḥiel's triumphant account records no such rejoinder.

[15] On these developments, see Chazan in Friedman et al. (2012: 80–92); Krauss and Horbury (1995: 160–61).

[16] On the origin and function of the *Toledot Yeshu* literature in medieval Jewish culture, see Meerson and Schäfer (2014: 1.3–18). The basic form of the composition is first attested in a ca. 826/827 polemical treatise by Archbishop Agobard of Lyon (*De iudaicis superstitionibus et erroribus* 10), on whose account see ibid. (1.3–5). Allusions to Jesus' supposed apprenticeship under Joshua ben Peraḥiah appear in several surviving versions of the text, on which see ibid. (1.58–59).

[17] For the characterization of the *Toledot Yeshu* as a polemical counterpoint to the canonical gospels, see Biale (1999: 132–37), and cf. Funkenstein (1993: 39–40).

Nicholas Donin understood the psychology of the Jews. In exposing their secrets to their Christian neighbors, Donin laid bare the discomfiting fact that the Jews, despite their self-assurances to the contrary, actually knew very little about Christianity. Some years earlier, the Spanish Jewish chronographer Abraham ibn Daud could assert with confidence the reliability of the Talmudic narratives involving Jesus, dismissing "the historical works of the gentiles" while hailing the "authentic tradition from the Mishnah and the Talmud, which did not distort anything."[18] Donin defied that conceit. Having joined Christian camp, Friar Nicholas was able to force the Jews to accept the superior truth of the gospels, and to falsify their own in the process. Indeed, one might discern in his elaborate trial a desire to reenact for the sake of his former rabbinic acquaintances the process of discovery whereby Donin himself came to realize that everything he thought he knew about Christianity was wrong.

What Donin did not know was that the Jews' supposed knowledge of Christianity was no less contrived than Rabbi Yeḥiel's defensive stratagem. Recent research has shown that the Babylonian Talmud is far from a reliable witness to the life of Jesus.[19] Originating during the late ancient period, the scandalous tales invoked during the Paris trial reflect the sensibilities of Jewish scribes who apparently knew very little about Christianity. The critical reader must therefore acknowledge that the Talmud's commentaries on Jesus were colored by the already centuries-old conflict between Christian and Jew that was just beginning to make its way into the Mesopotamian cultural sphere during the age of the Talmud's composition. The incentive of the Talmud's authors to denigrate the man whom they believed had incited the conflict naturally casts doubt over the sincerity of their portrait of the Christian Messiah.

The passage cited by Rabbi Yeḥiel is a case in point. On the surface, the strange tale of Jesus' apostasy seems to evoke elements of the gospel tradition preserved in the New Testament.[20] The flight from Judea to Egypt recalls the report in the Gospel of Matthew of a similar journey during Jesus' infancy.[21] Jesus' lascivious remark about the innkeeper might allude to his reputation for having shown compassion to his female disciples.[22] Perhaps most tellingly, his miscommunication with his master recalls Jesus' reported disputes with the

[18] G.D. Cohen (1967: 20–21), with discussion, ibid. (171–72, 229–30). As noted by Cohen (ibid., 114, n. 100), a corresponding claim appears in the work of ibn Daud's contemporary Judah Halevi (*Kuzari* 3.65).

[19] For the following, compare Schäfer (2007: 36–40), whose account of the story's composite nature are in general agreement with my own. See also Rubenstein (2010: 116–49), for a detailed analysis stressing the story's function as a warning for rabbinic masters to maintain cordial relationships with their disciples.

[20] This was long the premise Jewish scholars apt to treat the Talmud's allusions to Jesus as authentic, on which see Catchpole (1971: 11–69). For a recent proponent of this outdated approach, see Basser (2000: 73–74).

[21] Cf. Matt 2.13–18. For this identification, see, e.g., Laible (1893: 43); Klausner (1925: 26); Goldstein (1950: 77).

[22] Laible (1893: 44); Klausner (1925: 26).

Pharisees.[23] The Talmudic tale might therefore be read as an attempt to challenge the dominant Christian narrative by recasting it in negative terms.[24]

Yet closer examination reveals that its affinities with the Christian gospels are merely superficial. In fact, nearly every one of its components can be traced to elsewhere. The motif involving a flight to Egypt evidently was lifted from a similar passage in the Palestinian Talmud in which the roles of Joshua ben Peraḥiah and Jesus are played by the Pharisaic sage Judah ben Tabbai and an unnamed disciple.[25] The report of Jesus' excommunication echoes an unrelated procedural discussion elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud of the rabbinic ordinance of *niddui*, or temporary excommunication from the Jewish community.[26] Joshua's failed reconciliation with his disciple is mirrored in the Palestinian Talmud's report of the prophet Elisha's relationship with his own insubordinate disciple Geḥazi.[27] Finally, the allegation that Jesus corrupted his fellow Jews appears verbatim in an unrelated Talmudic passage confirming the legality of his execution in view of later rabbinic teachings on capital punishment.[28] In other words, none of these elements of the story appears to reflect sound knowledge of the Christian gospels. At best, one might surmise that its author synthesized and embellished his Jewish source materials using the gospel narrative as a structural template.

The story's characterization of Jesus is no more compelling. That Jesus had possessed magical capabilities was a commonplace belief among early

23 For similar assessments, see Bammel (1966–1967: 320–24); P.S. Alexander (1992: 17–18); Schäfer (2007: 39–40).

24 So Lauterbach (1951: 488–89), and compare more recently Jaffé (2003). In a similar vein, Boyarin (1999: 25–26), likens the author's brusque rhetoric to that of early Christian thinkers who likewise presumed to trace the origins of alleged Christian heresies to the moral failings of their reputed authors.

25 See *y.Ḥagigah* 2.2 (77d), and cf. *y.Sanhedrin* 6.6 (23c). Both Palestinian versions portray Judah ben Tabbai as a contemporary of Shimon ben Shetaḥ, who is cited elsewhere as a contemporary of Alexander Jannaeus (*y.Berakhot* 7.2 [11b]; *y.Nazir* 5.3 [54b]). On the literary relationship between the Palestinian and Babylonian stories, see Maier (1978: 114–16), and more extensively, Rubenstein (2010: 128–42). I follow Rubenstein (ibid., 124–27), in dating the Babylonian story to a relatively late stage in the Talmud's composition, i.e., the late sixth or seventh century. Cf. Kalmin (1999: 101–09), who estimates its date closer to that of its Palestinian prototype.

26 The Babylonian sage Ulla is twice credited for the opinion that this temporary ban was to be enacted by sounding four hundred trumpets, i.e., the procedure whereby the Israelite Judge Barak cursed the Canaanite city of Meroz (*b.Mo'ed Qatan* 17b; *b.Shevu'ot* 36a; cf. Judg 5.23). The sounding of a horn also figured in the Babylonian procedure for *ḥerem*, the more permanent rite of excommunication implicitly applied to Jesus in the Talmudic account of his apostasy; cf. *b.Sanhedrin* 7b, and see Horbury (1985: 34–37).

27 The Palestinian version of the Geḥazi story appears in *y.Sanhedrin* 10.2 (29b) (cf. 2 Kgs 6.1), while more elaborate Babylonian versions accompany the Jesus story in *b.Sanhedrin* 107b and *b.Sotah* 47a. See also *b.Berakhot* 17b; *b.Sanhedrin* 103b.

28 I allude to a passage appearing in uncensored manuscripts of *b.Sanhedrin* 43a, where Rabbi Ulla asserts that Jesus was justly indicted as a *mesit*, an Israelite who entices others to idolatry (cf. Deut 13.6–11), on which see Schäfer (2007: 64–65). Specifically, Ulla accuses Jesus of having practiced sorcery and having led Israel astray, allegations echoed in the story of Jesus' apostasy.

Christians.[29] His reputation for having performed miraculous feats of healing seems to explain his anachronistic pairing with Joshua ben Peraḥiah, whom Babylonian Jews likewise knew as a master sorcerer.[30] The verbal misunderstanding whereby Jesus insults the homely innkeeper appears to reflect a folkloric motif attested in a pair of Christian hagiographic texts predating the Talmud's composition.[31] Finally, the story's allegation that Jesus realized his apostasy by worshipping a brick seems to refer to an obscure cultic rite described in similar terms elsewhere in the Talmud itself.[32] These assorted effects of Mesopotamian popular culture perhaps were woven into the story to bolster its credibility before the eyes of the Talmud's target readership. In any case, they clearly speak to its fabrication by an irreverent rabbinic scribe possessing no reliable knowledge of the life of Jesus, much less of his significance to Christian believers.[33]

Although Rabbi Yeḥiel likely did not appreciate the extent of its forgery, that he doubted the story's integrity is sufficiently clear. He evidently knew enough about the New Testament to recognize that the Talmud's portrait of Jesus was nothing more than a distorted mirror image of the real Jesus of Nazareth. One might therefore surmise that Yeḥiel chose to produce his unexpected Talmudic witness precisely because he knew that he could deny its historicity without compromising the integrity of its source. But Yeḥiel's ingenuity came with a price. His confession that Jews trained on the Talmud actually knew very little about Christianity's origins exposed a lapse in his people's collective memory.

29 The use of Jesus' name as a magical talisman is widely attested in literary and epigraphic materials of the late ancient period, on which see M. Smith (1978: 45–67). On the currency of this practice in late ancient Mesopotamia, see Geller (1977). Evidently, even local Jewish sorcerers were not averse to invoking Jesus' name in service of their craft; see Levene (2003: 120–38) (no. M163).

30 Although not noted as a sorcerer in classical rabbinic texts, Joshua ben Peraḥiah is assigned magical capabilities in a number of Babylonian incantation formulas; for examples, see Naveh and Shaked (1998: 158–160) (no. 5), with discussion, ibid. (162–63); Levene (2003: 31–35) (nos. M50 and M59). See also Reiner (1998: 255–60), who posits that the Pharisaic sage was posthumously reinvented as a magician by Jews in search of a functional talismanic alternative to Joshua's Christian namesake.

31 See Gero (1994), followed by Rubenstein (2010: 146–48). For the Christian texts, see Garsoïan (1989: 207); Price (1991: 147).

32 The Aramaic term *binta*, conventionally translated as "brick" or "tile," has stymied commentators wishing to find specific Christian connotations in the object of Jesus' worship. Alternative readings have thus described the article as an icon, a fish, and the moon; see Maier (1978: 122–25). Most recently, Murcia (2011) has inferred that the brick was molded in the shape of a cross. Per Maier, (ibid., 122), the Talmud elsewhere cites the veneration of bricks as a common Mesopotamian cultic rite (cf. *b.Avodah Zarah* 46a; *b.Avodah Zarah* 53b). Although not obvious to the modern reader, its intended heathen symbolism presumably would have resonated with the ancient reader. For similar comments, see Schäfer (2007: 37).

33 Rubenstein (2010: 142–46) is probably correct to note that the Babylonian story was meant to function primarily not as an indictment of Christianity but to underscore the lesson of the earlier morality tale involving Geḥazi. That said, its author's presumption to cast Jesus in similarly unflattering terms must be understood to connote a distinct polemical intentionality on his part.

The evidence put forth at the trial suggests that the Jewish sages who lived through Christianity's birth presumed to document it only centuries after the fact, and even then upon no sound evidentiary basis. The knowledge of the Christian other thereby inscribed upon the Jewish imagination was no less flawed than the polemical fictions upon which it was founded.[34]

Ironically, the Paris trial marked a turning point in the classical Jewish discourse on Christianity. Against all reasonable expectations, Rabbi Yeḥiel's counterintuitive reasoning was adopted by learned Jews eager to protect their sacred books from the bonfire. In time, the *Toledot Yeshu* fell into disrepute, its credibility compromised by its readers' loss of innocence regarding its counterfeit quality.[35] Outright denial of the Talmud's familiarity with the Christian Messiah became the norm among its devoted readers.[36] When, in the sixteenth century, the advent of Hebrew printing promised to open the secrets of the Talmud to a wider audience than ever before, its antagonistic allusions to Jesus and his followers were excised by Jewish editors eager to appease the Catholic censors then overseeing the production of their books.[37] Few of its Jewish readers mourned the loss. As far as they were concerned, a sanitized Talmud was better than no Talmud at all.

In view of these looming developments, one might infer that the unraveling of the ancient Jewish polemic against Christianity was inevitable. As the Christian argument against Judaism evolved to integrate genuine Jewish knowledge, the Jewish counterargument needed to evolve as well. Forced to accept the truth of the gospels against that of the Talmud, Rabbi Yeḥiel and his colleagues challenged their fellow Jews to rethink their received wisdom as to how the difference between Christian and Jew came to be. Not since the days of the Babylonian sages had the Jewish people been obliged to ponder that question. No longer could the critical thinker afford to imagine the Christian as nothing more than a Jewish antitype. The Paris trial thereby set in motion a search for Jewish meaning in the Christian schism that continues to this day.

34 See Chazan (2004: 72–76), who attributes this void in common Jewish knowledge to the populist *Toledet Yeshu* as opposed to its more obscure Talmudic sources.

35 Ironically, the covert Jewish transmission of the *Toledot Yeshu* after the High Middle Ages is best attested by the number of Christian authors who sought to expose its secrets; see Deutsch (2011). The fractured channels of the book's transmission likely account for the wide variety of forms in which the *Toledot Yeshu* has survived, on which see Meerson and Schäfer (2014: 1.28–39).

36 Among those who adopted Yeḥiel's strategy was the famed Spanish rabbi Moses ben Naḥman, or Naḥmanides, who utilized the same argument in a 1263 disputation in Barcelona. For further comments to this effect, see Berger (1998: 25–39), with reference to Rabbi Yeḥiel's ploy, ibid. (33–34). For a modern adaptation of the same apologetic technique, see Maier (1978: 268–75), who rather dubiously argues that all of the Talmud's alleged allusions to Jesus of Nazareth are medieval interpolations drawn from the *Toledot Yeshu*.

37 See Raz-Krakotzin (2007), especially ibid. (135–40), on the preemptive Jewish censorship of some of the earliest printed editions of the Talmud.

READING THE CHRISTIAN SCHISM AS JEWISH HISTORY

The purpose of this study is, in one sense, to fill the gap exploited by both the Christian and Jewish parties to the Paris trial. Why is the classical Jewish literary record, though replete with detailed information on all manner of Jewish subjects, virtually silent on Christianity's break from Judaism? What caused the memory lapse whereby the Jewish sages failed to document as it unfolded a development that would prove tremendously significant to their people and to the world at large? In the chapters to follow, I shall show that those questions demand a number of assumptions regarding the nature of the Christian schism difficult for the contemporary historian of Judaism to defend. In another sense, therefore, the object of this study is to reframe the question prompted by the Paris trial regarding the deficiency of the Jew's knowledge of the Christian other. I aim to pose that question from the perspective of a classical Jewish tradition that knows not of Christianity per se but, rather, of a movement of Christians from within the boundaries of ancient Jewish society to without.

My objective will not be to probe the Talmudic texts purporting to tell of Jesus' life as a Jew. Rabbi Yeḥiel and generations of scholars since have shown the feebleness of that approach. Nor shall I produce new evidence drawn from hitherto untapped sources. Rather, I shall attempt to configure previously acknowledged Jewish and Christian evidences within a new analytical framework. Tracing the Jewish encounter with Christianity from its inception through its earliest remembrances in the classical Jewish literary record, I shall attempt to explain how and why the rabbinic sages who authored that record responded to Christianity as they did. My aim, in other words, is not to retrieve a lost Jewish history of Christian origins to replace the discredited stories of the Talmud and the *Toledot Yeshu*.[38] I intend merely to account for how the memories informing those counterfeit histories might productively be read as witnesses to collective cognitive process whereby ancient Jews came to distinguish the Christian schism as such.

In order to demonstrate the empirical advantage of my approach, a few definitions of terms are in order.[39] What does it take to produce history? The concept of history is often confused with the past it is meant to document. Personalities and events are deemed "historical" in the sense that they are of the past, or, more simply, that they are no longer. But the discourse of history is far more complex than many of its casual consumers tend to recognize. To write history is to compose a narrative of the past tailored to advance the historian's agenda in documenting it.[40] To serve that agenda invariably compels

[38] Cf. Horbury (2010a: 358–66), who speculates that these sources, though admittedly flawed, might preserve elements of a lost Jewish narrative of Christian origins stemming from contemporary witnesses to the events in question. While that might well be the case, Horbury's thesis is too conjectural to offer significant guidance for my project.

[39] The following comments are informed by Jenkins (1991), particularly ibid. (6–32).

[40] Cf. Jenkins (1991: 40): "It is never really a matter of the facts per se but the weight, position, combination and significance they carry vis-à-vis each other in the construction of explanations."