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978-1-107-02301-7 - Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal

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Christianity in the Babylonian Talmud

An Introductory Discussion

The study of the historical relationship between Jews and Christians in the ancient world, a constant interest for scholars as well as nonscholars, is now in a position to benefit from a new wealth of information as new sources, new methodological tools, and new ways of thinking about old questions develop. At the same time, interest in the relations between the Babylonian Talmud (BT) and its social and cultural surroundings has recently been enjoying a revival with the publication of several attempts at a more accurate description of how, when, and why the Talmud was written as it was.

This book is a treatment of these two issues. It focuses on one aspect of the complex web of cultural contacts that shaped some of the main features of the Babylonian Talmud, and it examines a number of literary parallels between Christian and Jewish sources. More specifically, it discusses possible connections between monastic literature and the Babylonian Talmud. The result is a suggestion for a methodological approach to the study of the relationship between Jews and Christians, as revealed in analogies found in the literatures of both religious communities. I advance the claim that greater attention should be paid to the kinds of literature used when constructing the historical picture of this interreligious relationship. On the Jewish side, I argue that we must examine carefully the rabbinic literature produced in the Persian Empire, the Babylonian Talmud. This monumental rabbinic oeuvre, which had, no doubt, the most crucial effect on the formation of future Jewish culture, must be examined in its full historical context, which includes the rise of Christianity in the Persian Empire (often overlooked by scholars). On the Christian side, I examine a specific set of texts emanating from the monastic community. These texts, whose heroes are the holy men of late antiquity, can stand alongside the scholastic literature of the patristic fathers in shedding light on the question of Jewish-Christian relations. Because these texts of the early monks had an important influence on the Christian Church of the East where the Babylonian

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Talmud was being produced, they are an important part of the picture we are trying to reconstruct.

The comparison of monastic and rabbinic literature has the potential to yield a large amount of instructive data. In the areas of asceticism, spirituality, and the balance between holy and daily life, analogies are numerous and suggest many avenues of further comparison still waiting to be explored. This book claims that such exploration is worth pursuing. However, one who presents analogous religious materials is faced with a dilemma. To portray fully the benefits that arise from a comparative examination of passages from these two religious corpora, one must describe the sources at length and in depth, or their significance is not apparent to the reader. One has to detail the similarities and the differences between the two texts and explain what they tell us about the writers of both texts, their transmitters, and their readers. Alas, in a single book, an exhaustive and detailed comparison of this type would allow for the inclusion of only a handful of examples. Readers will rightly ask: Are these examples representative of a larger phenomenon or are they no more than a few exceptional cases that do not represent the whole picture accurately? On the other hand, if one merely lists the large number of analogies that exist to portray the potential of a comparative examination, the result will undoubtedly appear superficial. Readers will rightly wonder whether the simple list of analogies has significance beyond the analogy itself.

To address this methodological dilemma, I have adopted both approaches. The structure of the book is as follows. The first part offers a survey of the Sassanian Persian Empire (the third century to the seventh century), during which time the Babylonian Talmud was produced, with a focus on the Eastern church and the monastic community. The rabbinic and monastic corpora are then presented in broad brush strokes to demonstrate affinities in style, form, and themes. These chapters do not focus specifically on the Babylonian Talmud, but rather on rabbinic literature as a whole. There is no attempt to reach historical conclusions nor to examine each example at length. The idea is to offer an ethnographic dialogic approach and to show that the comparison between the monastic and rabbinic worlds as revealed through the texts of both religious communities is well worth exploring. The second part proceeds to an in-depth analysis of two examples from the Babylonian Talmud that find literary analogues in the monastic texts, suggesting some kind of literary relationship between the two. These examples open the door for a reconsideration of the nature of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the ancient world.

To achieve this twofold undertaking, I would first like to recapitulate some of the recent academic findings in the fields relating to the setting in which the Talmud was composed. The following survey of scholarship is not intended to serve as a full appraisal of the research done in these areas, but rather aims to provide the backdrop for my own work.

I first address the connections between the Babylonian Talmud and its Persian context and Western sources from the Roman Empire. These connections

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include Jewish and non-Jewish sources, and, in the case of the former, rabbinic as well as non-rabbinic sources, and they refer to literary as well as cultural relations between the two. To supply the necessary background for parallels with the Christian monastic tradition, I survey previous scholarly works dealing with the Jewish-Christian relationship in the Persian Empire. Since all of these studies rely on parallel processes and texts in various religious groups as well as possible contacts among them, literary and cultural, I conclude this chapter with a short methodological discussion of the nature of parallel-based research.

Outside Parallels in the Talmud

Starting with the Persian context, in spite of years-long academic neglect, the works of E. S. Rosenthal, Ya'akov Elman, Jacob Neusner, Shaul Shaked, and Shai Secunda among others have revealed the potential wealth of parallels found, and still waiting to be found, between the texts of the rabbinic period and Sassanian law and literature.¹ As these preliminary works show, recognizing the parallels is imperative to our understanding of both sets of texts as well as to our general understanding of the historical context in which the Babylonian Talmud was created.

Another area of research is the literary connection between Western sources and those found in the Babylonian Talmud. In this context, one should mention one of the earliest comments on this topic by Shaye Cohen, dealing with the philosophical school traditions and their parallels in the Babylonian Talmud. Cohen notes the absence of these parallels from the Palestinian sources; for example, there is no mention of the designation of an academic successor

¹ Jacob Neusner. *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1969); *Irano-Judaica: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1982–90); Eliezer S. Rosenthal, “For the Talmud Dictionary – Talmudica Iranica,” *Irano-Judaica* 1 (1982): 38–134 [Hebrew]; Yaakov Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law,” in *Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 227–76; Ibid. “Acculturation to Elite Persian Norms and Modes of Thought in the Babylonian Jewish Community of Late Antiquity,” in *Neti’ot Le-David*, ed. Yaakov Elman et al. (Jerusalem: Orhot, 2004), 31–56; Ibid. “‘Up to the Ears’ in Horses’ Necks: On Sasanian Agricultural Policy and Private ‘Eminent Domain,’” *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 95–149; Ibid. “The Babylonian Talmud in Its Historical Context,” in *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein*, ed. Sharon Lieberman Mintz et al. (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 2005), 19–28; Ibid. “Cultural Aspects of Post-Redactional Additions to the Bavli,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggadab*, ed. Jeffrey Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), 383–416; Ibid. “Yeshivot Bavliyyot ke-Vatei Din,” in *Yeshivot u-Vatei Midrashot*, ed. Imanuel Etkes (Jerusalem: Makhon Shazar, 2006), 31–55 [Hebrew]; for a survey of the literature, see the introduction in Samuel I. Secunda, “Dashtana – ‘Ki Derekh Nashim Li’: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts” (PhD diss., Yeshiva University, 2008).

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head.² For our purposes, his suggestion is crucial when he writes: “Perhaps then the parallels between patriarchs and scholars tell us more about the Hellenization of Babylonian Jewry in the fourth and fifth centuries than about the Hellenization of Palestinian Jewry in the second.”³ This is a good example of the way parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and non-rabbinic sources enrich our understanding regarding the cultural world of the former.

Recently Daniel Boyarin has used an example of borrowed Greco-Roman narrative in the Babylonian Talmud to demonstrate the plausibility of a “shared world between Hellenistic and Christian traditions and those of the Babylonian rabbis.”⁴ This type of research suggests that the notion of a hermetically sealed, exclusively inner-directed rabbinic community in Babylonia has become less and less convincing. Boyarin writes: “[W]e certainly need, I would suggest, to be looking to the west and the Greco-Roman Christian world in order to understand the culture of the Babylonian Talmud.”⁵

A recent work on this topic by Richard Kalmin demonstrates the significance of this intellectual phenomenon. According to Kalmin, the mid-fourth century was a time when later rabbinic Babylonia became receptive to Palestinian literature and modes of behavior.⁶ Kalmin also deals with the question of how Babylonian rabbis interacted with non-rabbinic Jewish texts and incorporated

² Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Patriarchs and Scholars Proceedings,” *American Academy for Jewish Research* 48 (1981): 57–85.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85. Cohen has since continued to address Christian parallels in the BT; see, for example, Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Antipodal Texts: B. Eruvin 21b–22a and Mark 7:1–23 on the Traditions of the Elders and the Commandment of God,” in *Festschrift Volume in Honor of Peter Schäfer’s 70th Birthday*, ed. Ra’anana Boustán et al. (Mohr-Siebeck, forthcoming 2013). I thank Shaye Cohen for letting me read this unpublished version as part of the Starr seminar at Harvard in spring 2012.

⁴ Daniel Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert et al. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–63. In this article Boyarin aims to show that the Hellenistic influences should be dated to a later date – stammaitic and post amoraic, late fifth century and later, when impact from Palestinian sources is “less likely than interaction with local milieu of trans-Euphratian Christian Hellenism” (p. 338). See also Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. pp. 133–92. There, on page 181, he says: “My point is not to argue that in general rabbinic texts are ‘influenced’ by GrecoRoman texts, but to use this particular incidence as evidence for a claim of cultural interdependence between the Sasanian East and the Byzantine West in late antiquity sufficient to understand and make plausible my attempts to read the Bavli within the context of literary and cultural moves taking place in that broader context.... I would emphasize that it is not specific texts and their influence, certainly not the transmission of written texts, that I have in mind, but rather the oral, ‘folkloristic’ transmission of elite cultural narratives and especially of a certain seriocomic satirical style.”

⁵ Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” 350.

⁶ Richard Lee Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149. Kalmin attempts to find “significant ways in which Babylonia, without losing its Persian character, behaves like Roman Palestine in the fourth century” (p. 10).

them into the pages of the Talmud. He suggests that a process of rabbinization of these non-rabbinic texts occurred prior to their integration as part of the core material. Nonetheless, he stresses, the non-rabbinic traditions remain discernible and can be detected using the proper philological tools.⁷ And if we are able to recognize and filter the Babylonian rabbinic alterations, then “rabbinic literature is a fruitful repository of nonrabbinic thought, belief, behavior, and gossip.”⁸

This brief survey has demonstrated the recent academic attention to the significant contribution offered by literary parallels. These studies sustain the view that the BT was not hermetically sealed to outside materials and literary contacts. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a survey of recent scholarship dealing with the importance of specifically Christian materials for the formation of the Babylonian Talmud. Chapter 2 discusses the historical conditions that enabled the Jewish-Christian connection, and Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 identify and analyze a new group of parallels highly suggestive of a Jewish-Christian connection.

Christianity and the Babylonian Talmud

Until recently, scholars have minimized the availability and significance of Christian materials for the formation of the Babylonian Talmud. The common academic approach to the issue of Jewish-Christian relations in Babylonia was to accept what was understood as the Talmud’s own testimony on the subject.

In a well-known passage in the Babylonian Talmud, a Babylonian rabbi who comes to Palestine is presented as one who is not learned in the polemical use of scripture, and who is unable to answer questions from taunting *minim* (probably early Christians). According to the passage, his inabilities are due to the fact that he comes from a geographical area where there was no need for such knowledge – Babylonia:

Rabbi Abbahu commended Rav Safra to the *minim*⁹ as a learned man (lit.: a great man), and he was thus exempted by them from paying taxes for thirteen years. One day, they

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 61. His strongest support for this phenomenon is the familiarity of Talmudic passages with Josephus or Josephus-like traditions deriving from the West that reached Persian-controlled Mesopotamia and found a receptive rabbinic audience. See chapter 7, pp. 149–72. For our purposes, one of Kalmin’s final conclusions is essential: “If nonrabbinic voices deriving from Josephus find their way into the Bavli, then why should the same not occur, at least occasionally, with nonrabbinic voices deriving from late antique Babylonia itself?” (p. 14).

⁹ The term *minim* is pre-Christian and was first used to describe all groups who separated themselves from the community (i.e., Jewish heresy). In the Talmud, *minim* is already a general name for “the other,” and in this case it refers to Christians. See Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 221; Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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came across him. They said to him, “It is written: ‘You only have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.’ Does one who has a horse cause him to attack his friend?”¹⁰ He did not give them any answer; so they threw a scarf on him and were mocking him. When R. Abbahu came and found him [in that state] he said to them, “Why do you mock him?” Said they, “Have you not told us that he is a great man? He cannot explain to us the meaning of this verse!” Said he, “I may have told you [that he was learned] in Tannaitic teaching; did I tell you [he was learned] in Scripture?” – “How is it then that you know it and he does not?” “We,” he replied, “who are located in your midst, set ourselves the task of studying the verses [thoroughly,] but they who are not located in your midst do not study it.” (Avodah Zarah 4a, Ms. Paris Suppl. Heb 1337)

In this passage, Rabbi Abbahu, the Palestinian rabbi of the third generation of Amoraim (turn of the third and fourth centuries), explains to the *minim* that his esteemed colleague, Rav Safra, a Babylonian rabbi who has come to Palestine, is not learned in the polemical use of scripture because he comes from Babylonia. Rabbi Abbahu, seemingly, is indicating an isolation of Babylonian rabbis from the Christian population of his time.

Scholars have traditionally taken this statement at face value. Ephraim Urbach, to name one, adopts this historical assumption while treating the differences between Palestinian sources of the Amoraic period, on one hand, and the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, regarding the issue of the repentance of the people of Nineveh.¹¹ While Christian exegetes used the repentance of the gentile Ninevites in the book of Jonah as an example of genuine repentance, some Palestinian rabbinic sources present the repentance as inferior and misguided. Urbach explains this hostility in the Palestinian sources as stemming from their historical context and as a polemical reaction to Christian exegesis, known to the Palestinian rabbis. According to Urbach, the lack of polemical elements in the Babylonian rabbinic exegesis of the book of Jonah is due to the relative unimportance of Christianity in the Babylonian context.

Urbach maintains the assumption that polemical debate with Christians was uncommon or even absent in Babylonia, despite the fact that strong anti-Jewish polemic arguments appear in the writings of the Eastern fathers of the church, arguments that show striking familiarity with Jewish midrash. Urbach explains this material away by asserting that polemical arguments were meant for internal purposes only, such as protecting against possible

¹⁰ Most manuscripts have here *דאית ליה סוסיא בישא ברהמיה קא מסיק ליה*. Most common English translations have: “If one is in anger does one vent it on one’s friend?” I, however, used Michael Sokoloff’s translation for this line (Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 794–5). I thank Shai Secunda for pointing this out to me.

¹¹ Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Repentance of the People of Nineveh and the Discussions between Jews and Christians,” *Tarbiz* 20 (1949): 118–22 [Hebrew].

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Jewish influences, and were not intended for an actual polemical dialogue with the Jews.¹²

In the last few years, scholars have begun to question the assumption of minimal Jewish-Christian contact – social, cultural, and literary – in late antique Babylonia, and some now support the view that there was more contact than previously thought.

In terms of the literary evidence, Naomi Koltun-Fromm has demonstrated some Jewish-Christian polemic confrontations, particular to Persian Mesopotamia, when comparing the rabbinic Amoraic literature with the writings of Aphrahat, the fourth-century Persian church leader.¹³ On one hand, similarly to Urbach, she shows that Aphrahat was familiar with rabbinic arguments. She argues that parallels between his presentations of Jewish ideas and what she finds in Midrashic and Talmudic passages prove that Aphrahat's claims of quoting his interpretations from his conversations with "a Jew" were probably true. On the other hand, she claims sources suggest that Jews during this time "spiritually persecuted the beleaguered Christian community by seeking converts from their midst, or at least by undermining the beliefs of the faithful."¹⁴ For example, she quotes a story from BT Kiddushin 73a already pointed out by Isaiah Gafni,¹⁵ associating Rava's Mahoza in the fourth century, a time period parallel to the persecutions of the Christians, with large numbers of converts. She further suggests that "a polemic against Christianity – echoes of which are heard in the rabbinic literature – stimulating Aphrahat's anti-Jewish refutations – may well have been the outcome of this spiritual persecution."¹⁶

Thus, she views the rabbinic literature and the anti-Jewish compositions found in Aphrahat's writings as two complementary halves of "an on-going conversation between Jews and Christians in Mesopotamia at the height of the Persian persecutions on the subject of true faith."¹⁷ This conversation included, according to her, exchange of ideas, biblical exegesis, and theology. For Koltun-Fromm, this dialogue and exchange of cultural and religious ideas may be construed in an environment of debate conducted between the two groups in the fourth century.¹⁸

Similarly, Adiel Schremer concludes that, contrary to widespread scholarly opinion that Babylonian rabbis did not engage in polemics with Christians and their teachings, "various Christian sources show that Christianity was well established in Babylonia at least as early as the fourth century, and that

¹² Ibid., 559.

¹³ Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47 (1996): 45–63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵ Isaiah M. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1990), 137–41 [Hebrew].

¹⁶ Koltun-Fromm, "A Jewish-Christian Conversation," 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

Jews and Christians engaged in religious polemics at that time.”¹⁹ Schremer notes elsewhere that, as opposed to Jews in Byzantine Palestine, where the attitude toward the Roman Empire was of a political character, “both Jews and Christians in Babylonia were religious minorities, and therefore Babylonian rabbis could have thought of the difference between Jews and Christians in religious terms and, consequently, could have been easily aware of the existence of Christianity” and engage in polemics with it.²⁰

Looking at this question from the perspective of the Christian community’s characteristics in the East, Adam Becker’s work provides another support for this scholarly approach.²¹ He suggests that the context for Aphrahat’s literary production should be understood as one in which “the local Jewish and Christian communities were not fully distinct and separate from one another.”²² And he supports his argument with the following examples: Christians flee to the synagogues in times of persecution, some of them are circumcised, and some refuse to eat blood. Some of the martyrs’ accounts are dated by the Jewish calendar, and Jewish cultic terminology such as “priests” and “Levites” are used in church terminology to identify the clergy.

Gerard Rouwhorst’s survey of Jewish liturgical traditions in early Syriac Christian communities emphasizes the profound debt of the East Syrian liturgy to its Jewish antecedents.²³ Rouwhorst discusses elements such as the ground plan of churches with their *bema*²⁴; liturgical readings from both the Torah and the Prophets – unique in the early church²⁵; closeness in form and style of the anaphora of Addai and Mari, composed in Syriac in the fourth (“or even third

¹⁹ Adiel Schremer, “Stammaitic Historiography,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaitim) to the Aggadah*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 224. See also his treatment of sexuality in rabbinic and Christian sources, in Schremer, “Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism,” in *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, ed. Rivkah Blau (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007), 35–63, where he cites as an example Shlomo Naeh’s article: Shlomo Naeh, “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and Its Syrian Background,” in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, ed. Judith Frishman et al. (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 73–90. Naeh’s article is an example for such polemical relationship in the Babylonian Talmud, where a loan word from Syriac Christian literature, *heruta*, meaning a woman who abstains from sexual relations, is used in a rabbinic story. The result is a mockery of the Christian view of abstinence.

²⁰ Adiel Schremer, “The Christianization of the Roman Empire and Rabbinic Literature,” in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, ed. Lee Levine et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 365–6.

²¹ Adam H. Becker, “Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes: Questioning the ‘Parting of the Ways’ outside the Roman Empire,” in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 373–92.

²² *Ibid.*, 377.

²³ Gerard A. M. Rouwhorst, “Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 72–93.

²⁴ First mentioned in Ephrem. Rouwhorst, “Jewish Liturgical Traditions,” 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

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century”),²⁶ to Birkat ha-Mazon; the call of the Apostolic Constitutions to observe the Saturday Sabbath in addition to Sunday – to assemble for prayer, to abstain from work, and to avoid fasting²⁷; and the Jewish elements in the Easter celebration – celebrated on the Jewish date, in the night from the fourteenth to the fifteenth of Nisan, and emphasizing the Passion and the Death of Christ rather than his Resurrection.²⁸

Becker thus makes the following statements:

Assumptions about a clear and easy separation between Jews and Christians in the East have contributed to the closing off of these fields of scholarship from one another ...²⁹ our assumptions about the lack of any interrelationship between the Jewish and Christian communities in late antique Mesopotamia have too often limited our capability of imagining how to use our wealth of textual evidence in new ways.³⁰

Another piece in this mosaic of scholarly views is the work of Peter Schäfer in his recent book, *Jesus in the Talmud*.³¹ Schäfer asserts that the Babylonian Talmud contains polemic adaptations of the Jesus traditions. These rabbinic stories, according to him, are retellings of the New Testament narrative, ridiculing the accounts of Jesus’ life. The Talmud’s main target is traditions found in the gospel of John with its strongly anti-Jewish bias. The gospel was known to the rabbis independently or through Tatian’s Diatessaron. In a careful examination of these paragraphs, Schäfer shows that Jesus’ family, his conception, his divine powers, and his trial and execution are all treated with parody, inversion, and distortion to create “a daring and powerful counter-Gospel to the New Testament in general and John in particular.”³²

Schäfer lists details such as references to a claim of virgin birth; the name of Mary Magdalene; Jesus as a Torah teacher; healing in the name of Jesus; Jesus’ execution taking place on the fourteenth of Nisan; attempts by Pilate to save Jesus; and Jesus’ punishment as “sitting in hell in the excrement of his followers eating his flesh and drinking his blood who believe that through eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they will live forever.”³³ These references reflect some level of acquaintance with a literary source close to the gospels.³⁴

Schäfer concludes that the Talmud is not conveying independent knowledge of Jesus’ life but rather retelling the stories of the New Testament. These retellings, almost exclusively of the four gospels, constitute “a literary answer to a literary text.”³⁵ In asserting this, Schäfer rejects the many previous scholarly

²⁶ Ibid., 79.

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ Ibid., 82.

²⁹ Becker, “Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes,” 382.

³⁰ Ibid., 392.

³¹ Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³² Ibid., 129.

³³ Ibid., 113.

³⁴ Ibid., 128.

³⁵ Ibid., 97. Schäfer himself realized the connection between his claim and Kalmin’s (p. 175, n. 3).

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attempts to use the Talmud as an additional historical source for the life of Jesus. The Talmud's treatment of Jesus cannot enrich our limited body of knowledge about the historical Jesus, since the Talmud uses literary sources available to it at that late stage and adapts them to its needs. Schäfer carefully stresses that "we cannot reconstruct what the New Testament looked like that the rabbis had in front of them and we cannot be sure, of course, that they had access to the New Testament at all."³⁶ But he still maintains that the specific references found in both corpora make it much more feasible that the Babylonian rabbis had some version of the New Testament available to them. How, and in what form? Schäfer answers: "It is highly probable that the Sasanian Jews had access to the New Testament through the Syriac Diatessaron and later on through the Peshitta."³⁷

Thus it is noteworthy that only in the geographically and chronologically farther removed Babylonian Talmud, rather than in the closer Palestinian rabbinic compilations, do we find traditions closest to the traditions found in the New Testament. For our purposes, Schäfer's work advances the idea not only that the Babylonian Talmud was susceptible to outside, non-Jewish literary materials, but also that some of the materials the rabbis were dealing with were Christian. The rabbis of the Talmud were familiar with the New Testament gospels, read or knew them in some form or other, and used this material to polemicize against Christian traditions.³⁸

Schäfer's list of references to Jesus material taken from the gospels does not exhaust the allusions to the New Testament in the Bavli. One such example is the famous story laden with Matthew puns in BT Shabbath 116a–b, where the Evangelist is quoted and refuted from within using what seems to be a text very close to the gospel.³⁹ Schäfer himself notes that "it is striking, however, that they [the other allusions to the NT] too seem to be more prominent in the Bavli,"⁴⁰ concluding then that the Bavli has knowledge of the gospels and uses their Jesus material as well as other parts of the books.

Daniel Boyarin and Holger Zellentin's research further examines a few examples of polemics against Christianity in the BT, such as Avodah Zarah

³⁶ Ibid., 122.

³⁷ Ibid., 123. Even if not all of Schäfer's textual analyses are accepted as clearly anti-Christian in nature, and even if not all of his examples prove without doubt an acquaintance with the Christian gospels (see, for example, Richard Kalmin's review of his book in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009): 107–12), his work does show that at least some of the paragraphs in the Babylonian Talmud draw on knowledge of the Christian traditions.

³⁸ In a most recent publication, Schäfer is even more explicit in claiming that the BT "presupposes knowledge of the New Testament" and "as a canonic text." Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 81–2.

³⁹ See Dan Jaffé, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme: orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique, Ier-IIe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2005); Burton L. Visotzky, *Fathers of the World: Essays in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 81–3.

⁴⁰ Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, p. 186, n. 107.