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**Peter Schäfer: Jesus in the Talmud**

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## Introduction

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This book is about the perception of Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, in the Talmud, the foundation document of rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity. What do these two—Jesus and the Talmud—have in common? The obvious answer is: not much. There is, on the one hand, the collection of writings called the New Testament, undisputedly our major source for Jesus' life, teaching, and death, most of it written in the second half of the first century C.E.<sup>1</sup> And there is “the” Talmud, on the other, the most influential literary product of rabbinic Judaism, developed over several centuries in its two versions in Palestine and in Babylonia (the first, the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud, was edited in fifth-century Palestine, and the second, the Babylonian Talmud, reached its final form in the early seventh century in Babylonia). Both documents, the New Testament and the Talmud, could not be more different in form and content: the one, written in Greek, is concerned about the mission of this Jesus of Nazareth, who, regarded as the Messiah and the Son of God, was rejected in this claim by most of his fellow Jews, put to death by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, and resurrected on the third day after his crucifixion and taken up into heaven; the other, written mostly in Aramaic, is a huge collection of mainly legal discussions that deal with the intricacies of a daily life conducted according to the rabbinic interpretations of Jewish law.

## 2 Introduction

Moreover, and here things become much more complicated, with the juxtaposition of “Jesus” and the “Talmud” bordering on an oxymoron, both stand in a highly charged and antagonistic relationship with each other. The Jewish sect triggered by Jesus in Palestine would eventually evolve into a religion of its own, a religion to boot that would claim to have superseded its mother religion and position itself as the new covenant against the old and outdated covenant of the people of Israel by birth. And at precisely the time when Christianity rose from modest beginnings to its first triumphs, the Talmud (or rather the two Talmudim) would become the defining document of those who refused to accept the new covenant, who so obstinately insisted on the fact that nothing had changed and that the old covenant was still valid.

Yet strangely enough, the figure of Jesus does appear in the Talmud, as does his mother Mary—not in a coherent narrative, but scattered throughout the rabbinic literature in general and the Talmud in particular<sup>2</sup> and often dealt with in passing, in conjunction with another subject pursued as the major theme. In fact, Jesus is mentioned in the Talmud so sparingly that in relation to the huge quantity of literary production culminating in the Talmud, the Jesus passages can be compared to the proverbial drop in the *yam ha-talmud* (“the ocean of the Talmud”). The earliest coherent narrative about Jesus’ life from a Jewish viewpoint that we possess is the (in)famous polemical tract *Toledot Yeshu* (“History of Jesus”), which, however, took shape in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages, well beyond the period of our concern here (although, to be sure, some earlier versions may go back to Late Antiquity).<sup>3</sup>

So why bother? If the rabbis of rabbinic Judaism did not care much about Jesus, why should we care about the few details that they do transmit, apart from simply stating the fact that they did not care much? This is one possible approach, and, as we will see, the one that has been taken in the most recent research on our subject. But I do not think that it is an appropriate response to the problem posed by the admittedly meager evidence. First, the question of Jesus in the Talmud is, of course, part of the much larger question of whether and how the nascent Christian movement is reflected in the literary output of rabbinic Judaism. And here we are standing on much firmer ground: Jesus may not be directly mentioned, but Christianity, the movement that he set in motion, may well be

discussed. Second, the starkly antagonistic paradigm of “Judaism” versus “Christianity,” forever frozen, as it were, in splendid isolation from each other, has come under closer scrutiny over the past two decades. The overly simplistic black-and-white model of the one sister religion (“Christianity”) emerging out of the other and almost simultaneously breaking off from it and choosing its own and independent path, and of the other (“Judaism”), remarkably unimpressed by this epoch-making event, steering its own course until being overcome by the historic momentum of the stronger “religion,” no longer holds; the reality as it transpires from more detailed and unbiased research is much more complex and perplexing.<sup>4</sup> Hence, no matter what the accumulation of quantitative evidence, we need to take very seriously any trace of a discourse between Judaism and Christianity, let alone of a reaction to Christianity’s founder.

As a matter of fact, some scholars have taken it exceptionally seriously. The history of research on how the Jews of Late Antiquity discussed Christianity in general and Jesus in particular is impressively rich and deserves a study of its own.<sup>5</sup> It takes as its starting point the scattered rabbinic evidence about Jesus and Christianity in talmudic sources as well as the tract *Toledot Yeshu*, which was widely disseminated in the Middle Ages and the early modern period and became the major source for Jewish knowledge about Jesus. One of the first landmarks of a Christian examination of these Jewish sources, made increasingly accessible through Jewish converts, was the polemical treatise *Pugio fidei* (“The Dagger of Faith”) composed by the Spanish Dominican friar Raymond Martini (d. 1285), which uses many extracts from talmudic and later rabbinic sources. It influenced most of the subsequent polemical, anti-Jewish pamphlets, particularly after the lost manuscript was rediscovered by the humanist scholar Justus Scaliger (d. 1609) and republished in 1651 (Paris) and 1678 (Leipzig). In 1681 the Christian Hebraist and polyhistorian Johann Christoph Wagenseil, a professor at the University of Altdorf in Germany,<sup>6</sup> published his collection of Jewish anti-Christian polemics *Tela ignea Satanae. Hoc est: arcani et horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christum Deum et Christianam religionem libri* (“Flaming Arrows of Satan; that is, the secret and horrible books of the Jews against Christ, God, and the Christian religion”), also drawing on the talmudic literature and the *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>7</sup> The first book solely devoted to Jesus in the talmudic literature was the

#### 4 Introduction

1699 dissertation, submitted at the University of Altdorf by the Protestant Orientalist Rudolf Martin Meelführer, *Jesus in Talmude* (“Jesus in the Talmud”).<sup>8</sup> Unlike Wagenseil, who was highly influential and widely read, his student Meelführer was almost immediately forgotten; both, however, were surpassed in their influence by Johann Andreas Eisenmenger’s German work in two volumes, *Entdecktes Judenthum* (“Judaism Unmasked”), which would become—until well into the modern period—a major source for anti-Semitic attacks against the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas in the early modern period the “Jesus in the Talmud” paradigm served almost solely as an inexhaustible source for anti-Jewish sentiments, the subject gained more serious and critical recognition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the extensive relevant literature a few authors deserve special attention:<sup>10</sup> Samuel Krauss presented the first scholarly analysis of the *Toledot Yeshu*, based on an edition and comprehensive analysis of the variant versions of the text (1902), which even today remains the authoritative treatment of the subject.<sup>11</sup> A year later, in 1903, Travers Herford published his *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*,<sup>12</sup> which would become the standard book about Christianity and Jesus in rabbinic sources, particularly in the English-speaking world. Herford’s approach can be called maximalistic in every regard: not only are the many passages that mention the *minim* (“heretics” in the broadest sense of the term) dealing almost without exception with Christians, but he also concludes that almost all the passages in the rabbinic literature that have been remotely connected with Jesus and his life indeed refer to Jesus. The fact that he is rather restrained with regard to the value of the rabbinic sources as evidence for the attempt to reconstruct the *historical* Jesus<sup>13</sup> does not detract from his generally maximalistic and quite naive approach.

The first attempt to examine the relevant rabbinic passages about Jesus and Christianity critically and to provide a text critical edition and translation was made in 1910 by the Christian German scholar Hermann L. Strack (the same Strack who gained enormous reputation through his famous *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*)<sup>14</sup> in his 1910 monograph *Jesus, die Häretiker und die Christen nach den ältesten jüdischen Angaben*.<sup>15</sup> Strack set a sober tone, not only with regard to the historical value of the rabbinic evidence but also with regard to the number of the relevant passages, that was to become a major trend particularly in German-language

research.<sup>16</sup> The first major scholarly book on Jesus in Hebrew, published in 1922 by the Hebrew University professor Joseph Klausner,<sup>17</sup> follows in its assessment of the Jesus passages a similar critical tendency: the evidence is scanty and does not contribute much to our knowledge of the historical Jesus; much of it is legendary and reflects the Jewish attempt to counter Christian claims and reproaches. The same is true for Morris Goldstein's *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* of 1950<sup>18</sup> and a long (and rather convoluted) essay by Jacob Lauerbach, published in 1951.<sup>19</sup>

The climax of the latest development in the scholarly literature concerned with Jesus in the Talmud is Johann Maier's book of 1978, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung*.<sup>20</sup> This is, in many respects, an amazing and disturbing book. It presents the most comprehensive, painstakingly erudite treatment of the subject so far. Maier has sifted through all the secondary literature, even if only remotely relevant, and showers the reader with excruciating details about who wrote what, and when. More important, all the rabbinic sources that have ever been brought into connection with Jesus are analyzed in every possible regard, with Maier taking great pains not just to discuss bits and pieces ripped out of context but to examine them always within the larger literary structure in which they are preserved. This is definitely a huge step forward in comparison with the rather atomistic efforts of his predecessors. But it is achieved at a high price. The reader who has followed Maier through all his endless and winding analyses, peppered with sophisticated charts, is left with the quite unsatisfying question: what is the purpose of all of this? For what Maier ultimately presents is an excess in scholarly acumen that leads nowhere or, to put a slightly more positive spin on it, that leads to the frustrating conclusion of "much ado about nothing." His book is the epitome of a minimalist exercise, just the opposite of Herford. According to Maier, there is hardly any passage left in the rabbinic literature that can be justifiably used as evidence of the Jesus of the New Testament. The rabbis did not care about Jesus, they did not know anything reliable about him, and what they might have alluded to is legendary at best and rubbish at worst—not worthy of any serious scholarly attention, at least after Maier has finally and successfully deconstructed the "evidence."

To be sure, he does not say so in these words; in fact, it is rather difficult to determine what he really thinks about the results of his exercise.

Clearly, he wants to position himself between or, more precisely, beyond the two alternatives of the anti-Jewish Christian and the apologetic Jewish approach. Whereas the former—charged with emotion—uses as its yardstick the theological truth of New Testament Christology, and finds everything that deviates from this “truth” appalling, the latter—painfully embarrassed by what their forefathers might have thought up—opts for a more restrained attitude and calls for moderation and distinction. Maier, naturally, dismisses the Christian anti-Jewish bias and finds the Jewish approach more appealing because he regards it altogether as more “critical” and “skeptical” and as capable—in what he regards as the epitome of modern critical scholarship—of distinguishing between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the Christian faith. But he disapproves of its apologetic tendency to tone down the anti-Christian polemic in the Jewish sources, and he even lets himself be carried away in this context by the highly charged question: why shouldn’t the Jews have allowed themselves to polemicize, since, after all, the holy Church Fathers and the Christian theologians did precisely this, over and over again, and with considerable political and social consequences?<sup>21</sup> Indeed, why shouldn’t they have? Maier’s question should have become the starting point of a much deeper inquiry into the subject. But unfortunately, these and very few similar remarks are the only “emotional outbursts” that Maier grants himself. In general he remains the “objective” and “rational” scholar, who has overcome, with his literary deconstruction of the sources, Christian anti-Judaism and Jewish apologetics alike.

Is this, then, the last word? Is there no other option beyond Christian anti-Judaism, Jewish apologetics, and Maier’s almost “scientific” explaining away of the evidence? I strongly believe there is, and I intend to demonstrate that in the chapters of this book. Before we enter the detailed discussion of the relevant sources, I will set forth some of the principal considerations that will guide me through this discussion.

Since this book is not aimed just at specialists, let me first clarify what I mean by discussing Jesus in the Talmud. By “Talmud” in the broadest sense of the term I mean the entire corpus of rabbinic literature, that is, the literature left to us by the rabbis, the self-appointed heroes of the Judaism of the classical period between the first and the seventh century C.E.<sup>22</sup> This literature includes the Mishna and the Tosefta (the early twin

collections of legal decisions, edited around 200 C.E. and in the third century respectively), the midrashim (the rabbinic commentaries on the Hebrew Bible in their manifold form), and—in the more narrowly defined and technical sense of the word—the Talmud in its two manifestations, the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud (edited in the rabbinic academies of Palestine in the fifth century) and the Babylonian Talmud (edited in the rabbinic academies of Babylonia in the seventh century C.E.). The later polemical tract *Toledot Yeshu* is not part of this investigation, although I do hope to turn to it in a follow-up project and, in addition to preparing a modern edition and translation, to clarify further its relationship with the talmudic evidence.<sup>23</sup>

I follow the traditional distinction between the earlier tannaitic sources (i.e., sources that are ascribed to the rabbis of the first and second centuries) and the later amoraic sources (i.e., sources that are ascribed to rabbis of the third through the sixth centuries) of the relevant talmudic literature. In addition, I put great emphasis on whether a certain tradition appears in Palestinian and Babylonian sources or solely in Babylonian sources, that is, in the Babylonian Talmud alone. Indeed, in calling the book *Jesus in the Talmud* I emphasize the highly significant role played by the Babylonian Talmud and Babylonian Jewry.

The source material that I have chosen for analysis focuses on Jesus and his family. In other words, I am not claiming to deal with the much broader subject of how Christianity as such is reflected in the literature of rabbinic Judaism. One could argue that a book about “Jesus” in the Talmud cannot adequately be written without taking this broader context of “Christianity” into full consideration. To a certain extent I agree with such an approach (and sometimes I will venture into more comprehensive categories); yet I nevertheless take the risk of limiting myself to this more narrowly defined question because I believe that Jesus, along with his family, was indeed perceived in our sources as a subject of its own.

Unlike Maier and many of his predecessors, I start with the deliberately naive assumption that the relevant sources do refer to the figure of Jesus unless proven otherwise. Hence, I put the heavier burden of proof on those who want to decline the validity of the Jesus passages. More precisely, I do not see any reason why the tannaitic Jesus ben Pantera/Pandera (“Jesus son of Pantera/Pandera”) and Ben Stada (“son of Stada”) passages should not

refer to Jesus, and I will justify this claim in the book. Here I substantially disagree with Maier who vehemently denies the possibility that there are authentic tannaitic Jesus passages and even declares the amoraic passages as all belonging to the post-talmudic rather than to the talmudic period.<sup>24</sup>

However, we need to make here an important qualification. The fact that I accept most of the relevant sources as referring to Jesus (and his family, particularly his mother), does not, by any means, assume the historicity of these sources. As I see it, Maier's most fateful mistake is the way he poses the problem of the historicity of his texts. He takes it for granted that in having purged the bulk of rabbinic literature from Jesus and in allowing for "authentic" Jesus passages to appear only in the very late talmudic and preferably the post-talmudic sources, he has solved the historicity problem once and forever: the few authentic passages, he maintains, are all very late and hence do not contribute anything to the historical Jesus. For what he is concerned about, almost obsessed with, is the historical Jesus. This is why he is so fond of the distinction, in (mostly) Jewish authors, between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the faith (following, of course, the differentiation being made in critical New Testament scholarship). The historical Jesus does not appear in our rabbinic sources; they do not provide any reliable evidence of him, let alone historical "facts" that deviate from the New Testament and therefore must be taken seriously. According to Maier, that's the end of the story: since the rabbinic literature is meaningless in our quest for the historical Jesus, it is altogether worthless for serious scholarly attention with regard to our subject matter.

I agree that much of our Jesus material is relatively late; in fact, I will argue that the most explicit Jesus passages (those passages that deal with him as a person) appear only in the Babylonian Talmud and can be dated, at the earliest, to the late third–early fourth century C.E. Yet I strongly disagree with Maier that this is the end of the story. On the contrary, I will claim that it is only here that our real inquiry begins. I propose that these (mainly) Babylonian stories about Jesus and his family are deliberate and highly sophisticated counternarratives to the stories about Jesus' life and death in the Gospels—narratives that presuppose a detailed knowledge of the New Testament, in particular of the Gospel of John, presumably through the Diatessaron and/or the Peshitta, the New Testament of the

Syrian Church.<sup>25</sup> More precisely, I will argue—following indeed some of the older research—that they are polemical counternarratives that parody the New Testament stories, most notably the story of Jesus’ birth and death. They ridicule Jesus’ birth from a virgin, as maintained by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and they contest fervently the claim that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Most remarkably, they counter the New Testament Passion story with its message of the Jews’ guilt and shame as Christ killers. Instead, they reverse it completely: yes, they maintain, we accept responsibility for it, but there is no reason to feel ashamed because we rightfully executed a blasphemer and idolater. Jesus deserved death, and he got what he deserved. Accordingly, they subvert the Christian idea of Jesus’ resurrection by having him punished forever in hell and by making clear that this fate awaits his followers as well, who believe in this impostor. There is no resurrection, they insist, not for him and not for his followers; in other words, there is no justification whatsoever for this Christian sect that impudently claims to be the new covenant and that is on its way to establish itself as a new religion (not least as a “Church” with political power).

This, I will posit, is the historical message of the (late) talmudic evidence of Jesus. A proud and self-confident message that runs counter to all that we know from Christian and later Jewish sources. I will demonstrate that this message was possible only under the specific historical circumstances in Sasanian Babylonia, with a Jewish community that lived in relative freedom, at least with regard to Christians—quite different from conditions in Roman and Byzantine Palestine, with Christianity becoming an ever more visible and aggressive political power. This is not to say that the Palestinian sources are devoid of any knowledge of Christianity and Jesus. On the contrary, they are vividly and painfully aware of the spread of Christianity. They are not simply denying or ignoring it (in a kind of Freudian mechanism of denial and repression), as has often been suggested; rather they are acknowledging Christianity and engaged in a remarkably intense exchange with it. But still, Jesus as a person, his life, and his fate are much less prominent in the Palestinian sources. So my claim is that it is not so much the distinction between earlier and later sources that matters but the distinction between Palestinian and Babylonian sources, between the two major centers of Jewish life in antiquity. As

we shall see, the different political and religious conditions under which the Jews lived created very different attitudes toward Christianity and its founder.

Finally, what kind of Jewish society was it that dealt in this particular way with the question of Jesus and Christianity—daringly self-confident in Babylonia, and so much more restrained in Palestine? The answer is simple but probably not very satisfying for a social historian: it was no doubt an elitist society of the rabbinic academies. The creators and addressees of this discourse were the rabbis and their students, not the ordinary Jew who did not have access to the rabbinic deliberations—although the possibility cannot be ruled out that the academic discourse also penetrated into sermons delivered in synagogues and therefore did reach the “ordinary man,” but there is no evidence of this. Moreover, it needs to be reemphasized that the Jesus passages in the Talmud are the proverbial drop of water in the ocean, neither quantitatively significant nor presented in a coherent manner nor, in many cases, a subject of their own. Yet they are much more than just figments of imagination, scattered fragments of lost memory. Adequately analyzed and read in conjunction with one another, they are powerful evidence of bold discourse with the Christian society, of interaction between Jews and Christians, which was remarkably different in Palestine and Babylonia.

The chapters of this book follow the story of Jesus as it emerges from the talmudic sources as we combine them and put them in sequence. This is to say, I have set up the headings under which I present the evidence in order to present the material in a meaningful structure, not just as literary fragments. Although I do not wish to impose on the reader the notion of a coherent Jesus narrative in the Talmud, I do want to point out major thematic topics with regard to Jesus with which the rabbis were concerned. The first chapter (“Jesus’ Family”) deals with the first cornerstone of the New Testament Jesus narrative, his birth from the Virgin Mary. I will show that the rabbis drafted here, in just a few words, a powerful counternarrative that was meant to shake the foundations of the Christian message: for, according to them, Jesus was not born from a virgin, as his followers claimed, but out of wedlock, the son of a whore and her lover; therefore, he could not be the Messiah of Davidic descent, let alone the Son of God.

The two following chapters focus on a subject of particular importance to the rabbis: their relationship with their students. A bad student was one of the worst disasters that could happen to the rabbinic elite, not only for the poor student but also for his rabbi who was responsible for him. In counting Jesus among the students who turned out badly, the rabbis passed upon him their harshest judgment. Moreover, I will show that in Jesus' case, the reproach with which they confronted him clearly had sexual undertones and emphasized the suspicion of his dubious origin (chapter 2). The same is true for the story about Jesus, the frivolous disciple. Not only did he entertain lewd sexual thoughts, but, when rebuked by his rabbi, he became apostate and established a new cult. The message, therefore, is that the new Christian sect/religion stemmed from a failed and insubordinate rabbinical student (chapter 3).

The next chapter ("The Torah Teacher") does not deal with Jesus directly but with a famous late first–early second century C.E. rabbi (Eliezer b. Hyrkanos), whom the Roman authorities accused of heresy. The precise kind of heresy is not specified, but I will argue that it is indeed the Christian heresy that is at stake and that R. Eliezer was accused of being closely associated with a student of Jesus. Moreover, I will demonstrate that again sexual transgressions are involved because the Christian cult was characterized as enticing its members into secret licentious and orgiastic rites. R. Eliezer became the rabbinic *doppelgänger* of Jesus, indulging in sexual excesses and exercising magical power. The rabbis needed to punish him with the full thrust of the means at their disposal (excommunication) for threatening the core of their rabbinic authority.

Similar mechanisms are at work in the stories that deal with the magical healing power connected with the name of Jesus (chapter 5). In one story a rabbi is bitten by a snake and wants to be healed by the name of Jesus, spoken over his wound by one of Jesus' followers. His fellow rabbis do not allow the Christian heretic to perform his healing, and the poor rabbi dies. In another story the grandson of a famous rabbi, choking on something that he has swallowed, survives when a Christian heretic manages to whisper the name of Jesus upon him. Rather than being relieved, however, his grandfather curses the heretic and wishes that his grandson had died instead of being healed through the name of Jesus. In both cases it is not the magical power as such that poses a problem (for, on the contrary,

the efficiency of the magical power is taken for granted, even if exercised by a heretic and in the name of Jesus); rather, what is at stake is again the wrong magical power: the magical power that competes with the authority of the rabbis and that invokes another authority—Jesus and the Christian community.

With the sixth chapter (“Jesus’ Execution”) we return to the fate of Jesus himself. Here, a quite elaborate story—again only in the Babylonian Talmud—details the halakhic procedure of Jesus’ trial and execution: Jesus was not crucified but, according to Jewish law, stoned to death and then, as the ultimate postmortem punishment reserved for the worst criminals, hanged on a tree. This took place on the eve of Passover, which happened to be Sabbath eve (Friday). The reason for his execution was because he was convicted of sorcery and of enticing Israel into idolatry. As required by the Jewish law, a herald made the announcement of his death sentence—in order to allow for witnesses in his favor, in case there were some—but nobody came to his defense. Finally, he was regarded as being close to the Roman government, but this did not help him either. My comparison of this rabbinic narrative with the Gospels shows some remarkable congruencies and differences: most conspicuous among the former is the day before Passover as the day of Jesus’ trial and execution (which concurs with the Gospel of John) and among the latter is the rabbinic insistence on the fact that Jesus was indeed sentenced and executed according to Jewish and not to Roman law. I interpret this as a deliberate “misreading” of the New Testament, (re)claiming Jesus, as it were, for the Jewish people, and proudly acknowledging that he was rightly and legally executed because he was a Jewish heretic.

The story about Jesus’ five disciples (chapter 7) continues such charges. In contrast to the futile exercises of most scholars to find here some dark reminiscences of Jesus’ historical disciples, I read the story as a highly sophisticated battle with biblical verses, a battle between the rabbis and their Christian opponents, challenging the Christian claim that he is the Messiah and Son of God, that he was resurrected after his horrible death, and that this death is the culmination of the new covenant. Hence, as we shall see, this story, instead of adding just another bizarre facet to the fantastic rabbinic stories about Jesus, is nothing short of an elaborate theological

discourse that foreshadows the disputations between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages.

The most bizarre of all the Jesus stories is the one that tells how Jesus shares his place in the Netherworld with Titus and Balaam, the notorious archenemies of the Jewish people. Whereas Titus is punished for the destruction of the Temple by being burned to ashes, reassembled, and burned over and over again, and whereas Balaam is castigated by sitting in hot semen, Jesus' fate consists of sitting forever in boiling excrement. This obscene story has occupied scholars for a long time, without any satisfactory solution. I will speculate that it is again the deliberate, and quite graphic, answer to a New Testament claim, this time Jesus' promise that eating his flesh and drinking his blood guarantees eternal life to his followers. Understood this way, the story conveys an ironic message: not only did Jesus *not* rise from the dead, he is punished in hell forever; accordingly, his followers—the blossoming Church, which maintains to be the new Israel—are nothing but a bunch of fools, misled by a cunning deceiver.

The concluding chapter (“Jesus in the Talmud”) attempts to connect the various and multifarious aspects of the Jesus narrative in the rabbinic literature and to place them into historical perspective. Only when the fruitless search for fragments of information about the historical Jesus, hidden in the “ocean of the Talmud,” has been given up and when the right questions are asked, regardless of apologetic, polemic, or other considerations, can we discover the “historical truth” behind our sources: that they are literary answers to a literary text, the New Testament, given under very concrete historical circumstances. I will address the major topics that appear almost as leitmotifs in the texts—sex, magic, idolatry, blasphemy, resurrection, and the Eucharist—and place them in their contemporary, literary as well as historical, context.

Finally, since one of the most striking results of my inquiry is the difference in attitude of the Palestinian and the Babylonian sources, I will pose the question of why we find the most significant, radical, and daring statements about Jesus' life and destiny in the Babylonian Talmud rather than in the Palestinian sources. In pursuing this question I will try to outline the historical reality of the Jews and the Christians living in the Sasanian

Empire in Late Antiquity, in contrast to that of the Jews living in Palestine under Roman rule and subsequently under Christian rule. Then I will summarize the New Testament evidence as it emerges from our rabbinical texts and will again ask the concrete question of why the Gospel of John takes such a prominent place among references to the New Testament. In an appendix, I will address the problem of the manuscript tradition of the Babylonian Talmud and the phenomenon of censorship.

A brief technical note: the translations of the Hebrew Bible and of the rabbinical sources are my own (I checked, however, the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh, the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, and the Soncino translation of the Talmud and of Midrash Rabba); for the New Testament I used the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, third edition with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version, edited by Michael D. Coogan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. All translations of other sources are documented in the notes.

For the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmud (in Hebrew *ha-Talmud ha-Yerushalmi* and *ha-Talmud ha-Bavli* respectively) I use both the English terms and the Hebrew abbreviations Yerushalmi and Bavli.