

REVIEW

Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*

(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), hardcover, xv+189 pp.

Reviewed by Ruth Langer, Boston College

Growing from a seminar co-taught with Israel Yuval at Princeton University, Peter Schäfer's *Jesus in the Talmud* reviews well-trodden territory but derives new and important readings from this familiar evidence. Applying contemporary historiographical methods, Schäfer offers a convincing explanation of the talmudic texts about Jesus. In doing so, he avoids what he criticizes as the excesses of previous discussions of this topic, especially the maximalism of R. Travers Herford in his *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London, 1903) and the minimalism of Johann Meier in his *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung* (Darmstadt, 1978). Where Herford presumed that every possible source referred to Christianity, Meier established doubt about the applicability of most of these sources to knowledge about the historical Jesus.

Schäfer shifts the question and asks what knowledge about Christianity the rabbinic texts reflect. In this, he accepts the contemporary perception that the redacted rabbinic texts may not precisely transmit the traditions they purport to repeat. Instead, they reflect the concerns and world of the redactor(s) as well. Schäfer focuses his study by considering only texts that speak about Jesus and not all rabbinic references to Christianity. This allows him to consider these passages in comparison with other literature, most importantly the Gospel narratives themselves. The resultant list of passages derive primarily from the Babylonian Talmud, i.e., from the text least likely, because of its date and place of redaction, to reflect intimate knowledge of early Christianity in the Land of Israel. Indeed, Schäfer concludes that the talmudic authors did not have independent knowledge about Jesus. What they did have was knowledge of the literature about Jesus, from either the Gospels themselves or perhaps from the *Diatessaron*, the harmonization of the Gospels used by the Syrian church until the fifth century.

As is obvious to anyone who has encountered these talmudic passages, especially in the form that modern scholarship has retrieved them from manuscripts that predate medieval Christian censorship, the talmudic passages about Jesus respond to Christian traditions about him with parody, inversion, deliberate distortion, and not least with the proud proclamation that what their fellow Jews did to this Jesus was right: that he deserved to be executed because of his blasphemy, that he will sit in hell forever, and that those who follow his example up until today will not, as he has promised, gain eternal life but will share his horrible fate. (129)

Schäfer argues that these talmudic passages, when read together, “become a daring and powerful counter-Gospel to the New Testament in general and to John in particular.” (129)

Schäfer is not the first to notice the disproportionate attention paid to Christianity in the Babylonian Talmud. However, his explanation is able to draw on our emerging understanding that Jewish life in Babylonia was culturally embedded in its Persian context and consequently shaped in ways distinct from Jewish life in the Greco-Roman west. While Jews in the west were increasingly living in the presence of a triumphant Christianity, one that increasingly had the

power to respond to Jewish slights, Jews and Christians in the Persian east were both religious minorities in a Zoroastrian state. Because that state shared a contested boundary with the Christian Byzantine empire in the west, it suspected the local Christians of disloyalty and subjected them to prolonged periods of persecution. Christian martyrological texts of this era portray Jews as actively siding with the Sasanians against the Christians. In such a context, talmudic redactors were free to include disrespectful portrayals of Jesus in their literature. The issues appearing in the Christians martyrologies overlap significantly with the specifics of the Jewish parodies and inversions of the Gospel narratives found in the Babylonian Talmud's texts: Christian women died to preserve their virginity, while the Talmud suggests that Mary was a harlot, not a virgin; martyrs strove to die on Friday and their co-religionists would steal away the corpse to bury it secretly to facilitate their resurrection, while the Talmud suggests that Jesus' body was taken from the tomb and buried elsewhere, not resurrected.

Schäfer presents these conclusions in his final chapter, after taking his readers through a careful reading of the relevant texts. He divides the materials into eight topics, organized chronologically according to the life and death of Jesus. In each case, he presents the relevant texts from rabbinic literature (as a whole, not only the Babylonian Talmud), considers their manuscript variants, and offers his interpretation in dialogue with that of his predecessors and contemporaries, especially his former colleague, Johann Maier. Though occasionally built on not a small degree of speculation, these readings are always plausible and are most often convincing. Unevenness appears mostly in the notes, which expand dramatically when they touch on areas on which Schäfer has published previously, especially on issues of rabbinic-era mysticism. Missing from the volume is an overview of how these texts about Jesus intersect with the rest of rabbinic literature's statements about later Christians and Christianity. Where do they cease to reflect literary knowledge and begin to reflect actual encounters?

For Jews engaged in Jewish-Christian relations today, anti-Christian texts, especially those in authoritative literature like the Babylonian Talmud, must be counted among our "difficult texts." Schäfer's volume does not diminish the difficulty of these passages; indeed, it highlights the degree to which they deliberately slander the holiest elements of the Christian sacred narrative. But Schäfer does offer us a context in which to understand the composition of these narratives and their introduction into the Talmud. These texts become a Jewish contribution to a mutual polemic, one that increasingly carried real and dangerous consequences for Jews as Christianity became the dominant religion of the west.