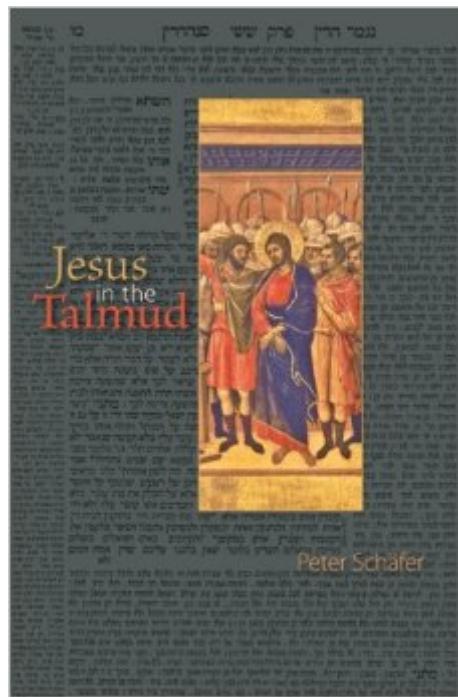


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Jesus In The Talmud



Synopsis

Scattered throughout the Talmud, the founding document of rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity, can be found quite a few references to Jesus--and they're not flattering. In this lucid, richly detailed, and accessible book, Peter Schäfer examines how the rabbis of the Talmud read, understood, and used the New Testament Jesus narrative to assert, ultimately, Judaism's superiority over Christianity. The Talmudic stories make fun of Jesus' birth from a virgin, fervently contest his claim to be the Messiah and Son of God, and maintain that he was rightfully executed as a blasphemer and idolater. They subvert the Christian idea of Jesus' resurrection and insist he got the punishment he deserved in hell--and that a similar fate awaits his followers. Schäfer contends that these stories betray a remarkable familiarity with the Gospels--especially Matthew and John--and represent a deliberate and sophisticated anti-Christian polemic that parodies the New Testament narratives. He carefully distinguishes between Babylonian and Palestinian sources, arguing that the rabbis' proud and self-confident countermessage to that of the evangelists was possible only in the unique historical setting of Persian Babylonia, in a Jewish community that lived in relative freedom. The same could not be said of Roman and Byzantine Palestine, where the Christians aggressively consolidated their political power and the Jews therefore suffered. A departure from past scholarship, which has played down the stories as unreliable distortions of the historical Jesus, Jesus in the Talmud posits a much more deliberate agenda behind these narratives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Agree with this author or not, he is no intellectual lightweight. He teaches Judaic studies at

Princeton University, and Rabbi Burton L. Vizotzky (on the outside book cover), calls Schaefer the premiere "Christian-Hebraist" of our time. His approach rejects the extremes of Travers Herford, who saw Jesus in many Talmudic texts (p. 4), and Johann Maier, who saw virtually none. Maier had overemphasized the deconstruction of literary sources (pp. 5-8), and relied on a stilted history of manuscripts. (p. 144). The TOLEDOT YESHU is not part of this investigation. (p. 7). Although commonly thought of as being medieval, some versions of TOLEDOT YESHU may go back to Late Antiquity. (p. 2). The most explicit Jesus passages in the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) date back, at the earliest, to the late-200/early-300 A. D. (p. 8). Schaeffer includes a helpful tabular Appendix (pp. 132-144) that details the various editions of the Bavli, listing the relevant verses and their comparative translations. [As a non-Jew, I found it a rewarding experience to read the printed and online Talmud myself. Particularly instructive verses deal with Jesus the Bastard Son (Sanhedrin 67a, Shabbat 104b), His execution (Sanhedrin 43a), and Him burning in hell in hot excrement (Gittin 57a). One useful online source, though in denial about Him in the Talmud, is the English Soncino Babylonian Talmud, located at halakhahdotcom.] Discrepancies between Bavli and the New Testament accounts have been used to argue that there is no Talmudic reference to Jesus at all.

I heartily second the glowing reviews Jesus and the Talmud has received from the scholarly community across the board. This is an important book, ably described by many scholars in the "Editorial Reviews" section. I would like to add, in particular, to the praise toward the book's clear and very accessible style. I teach and write history for a living, and not all academics make things so easy on their readers. I suppose the David Dukes of the world will find ammunition in Schaefer's work as long as the people they appeal to don't read it. I suppose also that some Jewish readers who do not understand the world of the distant past or the Middle Ages might have bruised feelings. Such are the dangers when entering into waters that spill onto some very ugly history of the last hundred years. I find Schaefer's argument completely convincing. Considering the rapid spread of the "Jesus movement" in the 1st century (and especially when considering that Jesus' earliest followers, like Paul, came to the synagogues spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean,) it strikes me as naive to believe that many, perhaps most, Jews of the era never heard anything of the "good news" and that what they did hear they simply ignored. It also certainly makes sense that Jews in and around what is now Israel, whose rabbis compiled the Jerusalem Talmud, would have been much more circumspect when dealing with the new Christians than those living in the Mideast whose leaders created the Babylonian Talmud. It would be interesting to know what Jews thought of the early Christians during the Temple period, but other events were much closer and important.

After the Jewish revolts against Rome in Judea (66-135 CE) Jews remaining in Roman territory had good reason to keep their heads down.

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