

## Matan – Great Debates in Jewish History, Philosophy, and Halakha Part 9 – Was Jesus the Messiah?

### Jesus' Family

**שבת ק"ד ב:ה'**

המסרט על בשרו: תניא אמר להן רבי אליעזר לחכמים והלא בן סטדא הוציא כשפים ממצרים בעל פה אמרו לו שוטה היה ואין מביאין ראייה מן השוטים: בן סטדא בן פנדירא הוא אמר רב חסדא בעלסטדא בועלפנדירא בעל פפוס בן יהודה הוא אלא אמו סטדא אמו מרים מגדלא שער נשיא הואי אלא כדאמרי בפומבדיתא סתת דא מבעלה:

#### Shabbat 104b:5

We learned in the mishna: If one unwittingly scratches letters on his flesh on Shabbat, Rabbi Eliezer deems him liable to bring a sin-offering and the Sages deem him exempt. It was taught in a baraita that Rabbi Eliezer said to the Rabbis: Didn't the infamous ben Stada take magic spells out of Egypt in a scratch on his flesh? They said to him: He was a fool, and you cannot cite proof from a fool. That is not the way that most people write. Incidentally, the Gemara asks: Why did they call him ben Stada, when he was the son of Pandeira? Rav H̄isda said: His mother's husband, who acted as his father, was named Stada, but the one who had relations with his mother and fathered him was named Pandeira. The Gemara asks: Wasn't his mother's husband Pappos ben Yehuda? Rather, his mother was named Stada and he was named ben Stada after her. The Gemara asks: But wasn't his mother Miriam, who braided women's hair? The Gemara explains: That is not a contradiction. Rather, Stada was merely a nickname, as they say in Pumbedita: This one strayed [setat da] from her husband.

**רש"י על שבת ק"ד ב:ה'ג'**

[הוספה מחסרונות הש"ס: בעל סטדא בועל פנדירא - ונקרא על שם בעל אמו אף על פי שהוא היה ממזר:]

#### Peter Schaffer. Jesus in the Talmud

epithet *megadla neshayya* given to his mother an allusion not to her long hair but to her profession as a manual worker (the Aramaic word *megadla* can mean "plaiting" but also "weaving").

3. The most pungent counterargument against the evangelists' narrative is, of course, the assertion of Jesus' illegitimate birth from an adulterous mother and some insignificant lover. It parries the claim of Jesus' noble Davidic lineage to which the New Testament attaches such great value: Matthew starts with his genealogy (Mt. 1) which leads back directly to David and calls him, as well as his "father" Joseph, "son of David" (Mt. 1:1, 20; Lk. 1:27, 2:4); he is born in Bethlehem, the city of David (Mt. 2:5f.; Lk. 2:4), and hence is the Davidic Messiah (Mt. 2:4; Lk. 2:11). No, the Jewish counternarrative argues, this is all nonsense; he is anything but of noble origins. His father was by no means a descendant of David but the otherwise unknown Panthera/Pandera (just a Roman soldier, according to Celsus, in other words a non-Jew and a member of the hated Roman Empire that so visibly and horribly oppressed the Jews).

Much worse, in turning Jesus into a bastard, the counternarrative takes up the contradictions within the New Testament story about Jesus' origins and ridicules the claim that he was born from a virgin (parthenogenesis). The New Testament itself is remarkably vague about this claim. Matthew, having established Jesus' genealogy from Abraham down to Joseph, concludes with Jacob who "fathered

Joseph, the husband<sup>39</sup> of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, who is called Messiah" (Mt. 1:16). This is clear enough: Jesus is the son of the couple Joseph and Mary, and the Davidic lineage comes from his father Joseph, not from his mother. Only under this premise, that Joseph was his real father, does the emphasis put on his genealogy make sense.<sup>40</sup> Yet after this dramatic beginning Matthew suddenly reveals that Mary was not married to Joseph but just betrothed and that she expected a child before they were legally married (1:18). This discovery troubled Joseph,<sup>41</sup> who was a just man, and he decided to dismiss her (1:19)—but in a dream it was revealed to him that her child was "from the Holy Spirit" (1:20). When he woke up from his dream, Joseph took Mary as his legal wife and accepted her son (1:24f.).<sup>42</sup>

The Jewish counternarrative points to the inconsistencies within Matthew's birth story. It does not spend time on the legal intricacies of betrothal and marriage but maintains that Joseph and Mary were indeed married, not just betrothed. The bizarre idea of having the Holy Spirit intervene to make him the father of Mary's child is nothing but a cover-up of the truth, it maintains, namely that Mary, Joseph's legal wife, had a secret lover and that her child was just a bastard like any other bastard. Joseph's suspicion, whether he was Mary's husband or her betrothed, was absolutely warranted: Mary

#### The student who turned out badly

**ברכות ל"ז ב:א'**

אין פרץ שלא תהא סיעתנו כסיעתו של דוד שיצא ממנו אחיתופל ואין יוצאת שלא תהא סיעתנו כסיעתו של שאול שיצא ממנו דואג האדומי ואין צוחה שלא תהא סיעתנו כסיעתו של אלישע שיצא ממנו גחזי ברחובותינו **שלא יהא לנו בן או תלמיד שמקדיח תבשילו ברבים כגון ישו הנוצרי:**

#### Berakhot 17b:1

"There is no breach"; that our faction of Sages should not be like the faction of David, from which Ahitophel emerged, who caused a breach in the kingdom of David.

“And no going forth”; that our faction should not be like the faction of Saul, from which Doeg the Edomite emerged, who set forth on an evil path.

“And no outcry”; that our faction should not be like the faction of Elisha, from which Geihazi emerged.

“In our open places”; that we should not have a child or student who overcooks his food in public, i.e., who sins in public and causes others to sin, as in the well-known case of Jesus the Nazarene.

When Jesus left...

found her guilty of some unseemly conduct, whereas according to the house of Hillel a man may have sufficient grounds for divorce “if she has spoiled his food” (*hiqdiha tavshilo*: m Git 9:10). It does not seem very likely that the wife’s spoiling her husband’s food simply refers to preparing some oversalted or overspiced dishes. The controversy between Hillel and Shammai rests on a different understanding of the biblical proof text for their legal reasoning: “If a man takes a wife and has intercourse with her, and it happens that she fails to please him because he finds some unseemly thing in her—he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her and sends her away from his house” (Deut. 24:1). What is translated here as “some unseemly thing” is in Hebrew *erwat davar* (literally “nakedness of a thing, indecency, lewdness”). Whereas Shammai puts the emphasis on *<erwah* (“nakedness, indecency”), arguing that only a clear case of the wife’s sexual misconduct deserves divorce, Hillel stresses the word *davar* (“thing”), arguing that any “thing” that may be related to “indecency” (even a minor offense or probably just the rumor of an indiscretion)<sup>8</sup> can be used by the husband as a reason for divorce. Hillel’s “thing” in this context is clearly not just anything that the husband can present against his wife (like spoiling his dinner), but anything that has to do with fornication.

This sexual context becomes even clearer if we take into consideration that the Hebrew word for the spoiled “dish” (*tavshil*)

acquires in the Bavli also the meaning of intercourse. Thus the Talmud relates of Rav Kahana (a Babylonian amora of the second generation and student of Rav, who went to Palestine):

Rav Kahana once went in and hid under Rav’s bed. He heard him chatting (with his wife) and joking and doing what he required (having intercourse with her). He (Rav Kahana) said to him (Rav): “One would think that Abba’s<sup>9</sup> mouth had never sipped the dish before (*šaref tavshila*).” He (Rav) said to him (R. Kahana): “Kahana, are you here? Get out because this is not what one is supposed to do!” He (Rav Kahana) replied: “It is a matter of Torah, and I require to learn!”<sup>10</sup>

Here the phrase “to sip/swallow the dish” undoubtedly refers to performing sexual intercourse. Accordingly, if a woman “spoils his [her husband’s] dish,” she does something that prohibits him from having intercourse with her—most likely some sexual misconduct that compromises her as well as his reputation. In the case of our son or disciple it is the man who spoils his dish, meaning that he does something that prohibits her from having intercourse with him—again presumably some sexual misconduct that compromises his as well as her reputation. The effect of this misconduct on the part of

### מסכת גיטין פרק ט

(י) בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים: לֹא יִגְרַשׁ אָדָם אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ, אֶלָּא אִם כֵּן מָצָא בָּהּ דְּבַר עֲרוּת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דְּבָרִים כד, א): “כִּי מָצָא בָּהּ עֲרוּת דְּבַר”. וּבֵית הַלֵּל אוֹמְרִים: אֶפְלוּ הַקְּדִיחָה תִּבְשִׁילוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: “כִּי מָצָא בָּהּ עֲרוּת דְּבַר”. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר: אֶפְלוּ מָצָא אַחֲרַת נְאֻה הַיְמִנָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: “וְהָיָה אִם לֹא תִמְצָא חֵן בְּעֵינָיו”:

Whatever the four culprits in the Mishna did—they are the only four commoners in history who are bound together in the horrible destiny of being categorically excluded from the world to come. Now the very fact that our talmudic text puts Jesus (instead of Balaam) in this company can only have the purpose of having him share the destiny of his companions, namely to have no portion in the world to come. This, however, is anything but an innocent statement. To be denied an afterlife is bad enough, but to deprive Jesus, of all persons, an afterlife reveals quite a wicked sense of humor. Did not his followers claim that he was resurrected (Rom. 8:34) and that the people of the new Israel would be saved only through him (Rom. 6:3–11)? By including Jesus among the very few of Israel who are categorically and on principle denied access to the world to come, the Talmud makes a very forceful and bold argument. It is difficult to imagine that such a statement is coincidental and not, on the contrary, a deliberate response to the New Testament’s claim of Jesus’ resurrection and his followers’ participation in his destiny. Hence, what the talmudic passage wants to convey in reality is the message that not only Jesus is excluded from the world to come but that all of his followers in the Christian Church share this devastating

### Jesus as Teacher

**עבודה זרה ט"ז ב:י"ז**

כשבא לביתו נכנסו תלמידיו אצלו לנחמו ולא קיבל עליו תנחומין אמר לו ר"ע רבי תרשיני לומר דבר אחד ממה שלימדתני אמר לו אמור אמר לו רבי שמא מינות בא לידך

**Avodah Zarah 16b:17**

When Rabbi Eliezer came home, his students entered to console him for being accused of heresy, which he took as a sign of sin, and he did not accept their words of consolation. Rabbi Akiva said to him: My teacher, allow me to say one matter from all of that which you taught me. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Speak. Rabbi Akiva said to him: My teacher, perhaps some statement of heresy came before you

**עבודה זרה י"ז א:א'-ב'**

והנאך ועליו נתפסת אמר לו עקיבא הזכרתי פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בשוק העליון של ציפורי ומצאתי אחד ומתלמידי ישו הנוצרי ויעקב איש כפר סכניא שמו אמר לי כתוב בתורתכם (דברים כג, יט) לא תביא אתנן זונה [וגו'] מהו לעשות הימנו בה"ס לכ"ג ולא אמרתי לו כלום אמר לי כך לימדני ישו הנוצרי (מיכה א, ז) כי מאתנן זונה קבצה ועד אתנן זונה ישובו ממקום הטנופת באו למקום הטנופת ילכו

**Avodah Zarah 17a:1-2**

and you derived pleasure from it, and because of this you were held responsible by Heaven. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Akiva, you are right, as you have reminded me that once I was walking in the upper marketplace of Tzippori, and I found a man who was one of the students of Jesus the Nazarene, and his name was Ya'akov of Kefar Sekhanya. He said to me: It is written in your Torah: "You shall not bring the payment to a prostitute, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 23:19). What is the halakha: Is it permitted to make from the payment to a prostitute for services rendered a bathroom for a High Priest in the Temple? And I said nothing to him in response. He said to me: Jesus the Nazarene taught me the following: It is permitted, as derived from the verse: "For of the payment to a prostitute she has gathered them, and to the payment to a prostitute they shall return" (Micah 1:7). Since the coins came from a place of filth, let them go to a place of filth and be used to build a bathroom.

**Jesus' Execution**

**סנהדרין מ"ג א:י"ח-כ"ב**

מתני' מצאו לו זכות פטרוהו ואם לאו יצא לסיקל וכרוז יוצא לפניו יוצא לסיקל על שעבר עבירה פלונית ופלוני ופלוני עדין כל מי שיודע לו זכות יבא וילמד עליו: גמ' אמר אביי וצריך למימר ביום פלוני ובשעה פלונית ובמקום פלוני דילמא איכא דידעי ואתו ומזים להו: וכרוז יוצא לפניו לפניו אין מעיקרא לא והתניא בערב הפסח תלאוהו לישו והכרוז יוצא לפניו מ' יום ישו יוצא לסיקל על שכישר והסית והדיח את ישראל כל מי שיודע לו זכות יבא וילמד עליו ולא מצאו לו זכות ותלאוהו בערב הפסח אמר עולא ותסברא בר הפוכי זכות הוא מסית הוא ורחמנא אמר (דברים יג, ט) לא תחמול ולא תכסה עליו אלא שאני ישו דקרוב למלכות הוה ת"ר חמשה תלמידים היו לו לישו מתאי נקאי נצר ובוני ותודה אתיוהו למתי אמר להו מתי יהרג הכתיב (תהלים מב, ג) מתי אבוא ואראה פני אלקים אמרו לו אין מתי יהרג דכתיב (שם מא, ו) מתי ימות ואבד שמו

**Sanhedrin 43a:18-22**

MISHNA: If, after the condemned man is returned to the courthouse, the judges find a reason to acquit him, they acquit him and release him immediately. But if they do not find a reason to acquit him, he goes out to be stoned. And a crier goes out before him and publicly proclaims: So-and-so, son of so-and-so, is going out to be stoned because he committed such and such a transgression. And so-and-so and so-and-so are his witnesses. Anyone who knows of a reason to acquit him should come forward and teach it on his behalf. GEMARA: Abaye says: And the crier must also publicly proclaim that the transgression was committed on such and such a day, at such and such an hour, and at such and such a place, as perhaps there are those who know that the witnesses could not have been in that place at that time, and they will come forward and render the witnesses conspiring witnesses. The mishna teaches that a crier goes out before the condemned man. This indicates that it is only before him, i.e., while he is being led to his execution, that yes, the crier goes out, but from the outset, before the accused is convicted, he does not go out. The Gemara raises a difficulty: But isn't it taught in a baraita: On Passover Eve they hung the corpse of Jesus the Nazarene after they killed him by way of stoning. And a crier went out before him for forty days, publicly proclaiming: Jesus the Nazarene is going out to be stoned because he practiced sorcery, incited people to idol worship, and led the Jewish people astray. Anyone who knows of a reason to acquit him should come forward and teach it on his behalf. And the court did not find a reason to acquit him, and so they stoned him and hung his corpse on Passover eve. Ulla said: And how can you understand this proof? Was Jesus the Nazarene worthy of conducting a search for a reason to acquit him? He was an inciter to idol worship, and the Merciful One states with regard to an inciter to idol worship: "Neither shall you spare, neither shall you conceal him" (Deuteronomy 13:9). Rather, Jesus was different, as he had close ties with the government, and the gentile authorities were interested in his acquittal. Consequently, the court gave him every opportunity to clear himself, so that it could not be claimed that he was falsely convicted. Apropos the trial of Jesus, the Gemara cites another baraita, where the Sages taught: Jesus the Nazarene had five disciples: Mattai, Nakai, Netzer, Buni, and Toda. They brought Mattai in to stand trial. Mattai said to the judges: Shall Mattai be executed? But isn't it written: "When [matai] shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalms 42:3). Mattai claimed that this verse alludes to the fact he is righteous. They said to him: Yes, Mattai shall be executed, as it is written: "When [matai] shall he die, and his name perish?" (Psalms 41:6).

**Peter Schaffer, Jesus in the Talmud**

Yes, of course, but again, this is the wrong question. Not the historical execution—crucifixion versus stoning/hanging—is at stake here but the question of why the Talmud regards it as a matter of course, or rather insists, that Jesus was executed according to rabbinic law. To answer this question, the rabbis were certainly aware that crucifixion was the standard Roman death penalty,<sup>50</sup> that Jesus was indeed crucified and not stoned and hanged. Hence, why their stubborn insistence on the latter? Because this is precisely the core of their polemical counternarrative to the Gospels. The author of our Bavli Baraita does not need to distort the New Testament report as such: the fact that Jesus was put on trial and rabbinic law.

So shall we conclude from this that the Talmud does not preserve any reliable evidence about the (historical) trial and execution of Jesus, and instead imposes on him later rabbinic law?<sup>49</sup>

Yes, of course, but again, this is the wrong question. Not the historical execution—crucifixion versus stoning/hanging—is at stake here but the question of why the Talmud regards it as a matter of course, or rather insists, that Jesus was executed according to rabbinic law. To answer this question, the rabbis were certainly aware that crucifixion was the standard Roman death penalty,<sup>50</sup> that Jesus was indeed crucified and not stoned and

the accusation and condemnation of a blasphemer and idolater, who leads astray all of Israel. We, the Jews, he argues, have put him on trial and executed him for what he was: a blasphemer, who claimed to be God and deserved the capital punishment according to our Jewish law. With this deliberate “misreading” of the New Testament narrative, the Bavli (re)claims Jesus for the Jewish people—but only to fend off once and for all any claim by himself or his followers. Yes indeed, the Bavli admits, Jesus was a Jewish heretic, who was quite successful in seducing many of us. But he was taken care of according to the Jewish law, got what he deserved—and that’s the end of the story.

executed like an ordinary criminal was devastating enough—such a story can hardly be made any worse. Instead, of the two (and indeed conflicting) stories about Jesus’ trial in the New Testament he chooses the “Jewish” one and completely ignores the “Roman” one. Unlike Pilate, who emphasizes the political part of the charge against Jesus, our Bavli author adopts and interprets the version of the trial before the Sanhedrin, combining it with the mishnaic law: the accusation and condemnation of a blasphemer and idolater, who leads astray all of Israel. We, the Jews, he argues, have put him on trial and executed him for what he was: a blasphemer, who claimed to be God and deserved the capital punishment according to

hanged. Hence, why their stubborn insistence on the latter? Because this is precisely the core of their polemical counternarrative to the Gospels. The author of our Bavli Baraita does not need to distort the New Testament report as such: the fact that Jesus was put on trial and executed like an ordinary criminal was devastating enough—such a story can hardly be made any worse. Instead, of the two (and indeed conflicting) stories about Jesus’ trial in the New Testament he chooses the “Jewish” one and completely ignores the “Roman” one. Unlike Pilate, who emphasizes the political part of the charge against Jesus, our Bavli author adopts and interprets the version of the trial before the Sanhedrin, combining it with the mishnaic law:

governor wanted to set him free, but we did not give in. He was a blasphemer and idolater, and although the Romans probably could not care less, we insisted that he get what he deserved. We even convinced the Roman governor (or more precisely: forced him to accept) that this heretic and impostor needed to be executed—and we are proud of it.

What we then have here in the Bavli is a powerful confirmation of the New Testament Passion narrative, a creative rereading, however, that not only knows some of its distinct details but proudly proclaims Jewish responsibility for Jesus' execution. Ultimately and more precisely, therefore, it turns out to be a complete reversal of the New Testament's

message of shame and guilt: we do accept, it argues, responsibility for this heretic's death, but there is no reason to be ashamed of it and feel guilty for it. We are not the murderers of the Messiah and Son of God, nor of the king of the Jews as Pilate wanted to have it. Rather, we are the rightful executioners of a blasphemer and idolater, who was sentenced according to the full weight, but also the fair procedure, of our law. If this interpretation is correct, we are confronted here with a message that boldly and even aggressively challenges the Christian charges against the Jews as the killers of Christ. For the first time in history, we encounter Jews who, instead of reacting defensively, raise their voice and speak out against what would become

### Jesus Eternal Punishment

גיטין נ"ז א:א-ד'

במאי דפסיק אנפשיה כל יומא מכנשי ליה לקיטמיה ודייני ליה וקלו ליה ומבדרו אשב ימי אזל אסקיה לבלעם בנגידא אמר ליה מאן חשיב בההוא עלמא א"ל ישראל מהו לאידבוקי בהו א"ל (דברים כג, ז) לא תדרוש שלומם וטובתם כל הימים א"ל דיניה דההוא גברא במאי א"ל בשכבת זרע רותחת אזל אסקיה [ליש"ו] בנגידא (לפושעי ישראל) א"ל מאן חשיב בההוא עלמא א"ל ישראל מהו לאדבוקי בהו א"ל טובתם דרוש רעתם לא תדרוש כל הנוגע בהן כאילו נוגע בבבת עינו א"ל דיניה דההוא גברא במאי א"ל בצואה רותחת דאמר מר כל המלעיג על דברי חכמים נידון בצואה רותחת תא חזי מה בין פושעי ישראל לנביאי אומות העולם עובדי ע"ז

#### Gittin 57a:1-4

That which he decreed against himself, as he undergoes the following: Every day his ashes are gathered, and they judge him, and they burn him, and they scatter him over the seven seas. Onkelos then went and raised Balaam from the grave through necromancy. He said to him: Who is most important in that world where you are now? Balaam said to him: The Jewish people. Onkelos asked him: Should I then attach myself to them here in this world? Balaam said to him: You shall not seek their peace or their welfare all the days (see Deuteronomy 23:7). Onkelos said to him: What is the punishment of that man, a euphemism for Balaam himself, in the next world? Balaam said to him: He is cooked in boiling semen, as he caused Israel to engage in licentious behavior with the daughters of Moab. Onkelos then went and raised Jesus the Nazarene from the grave through necromancy. Onkelos said to him: Who is most important in that world where you are now? Jesus said to him: The Jewish people. Onkelos asked him: Should I then attach myself to them in this world? Jesus said to him: Their welfare you shall seek, their misfortune you shall not seek, for anyone who touches them is regarded as if he were touching the apple of his eye (see Zechariah 2:12). Onkelos said to him: What is the punishment of that man, a euphemism for Jesus himself, in the next world? Jesus said to him: He is punished with boiling excrement. As the Master said: Anyone who mocks the words of the Sages will be sentenced to boiling excrement. And this was his sin, as he mocked the words of the Sages. The Gemara comments: Come and see the difference between the sinners of Israel and the prophets of the nations of the world. As Balaam, who was a prophet, wished Israel harm, whereas Jesus the Nazarene, who was an Jewish sinner, sought their well-being.

### Life After Jesus

#### Lawrence Shiffman, Who Was a Jew?

It is time to pause to consider the implications for the Jewish-Christian schism of the tannaitic sources studied thus far. The halakhic definitions of a Jew in the pre-Christian era have been established: ancestry through the mother or conversion, including circumcision for males, immersion, acceptance of the Torah, and offering of a sacrifice. These continued to be the only possible ways to enter the Jewish people in the period in which Christianity came to the fore. Further, it was determined that the tannaim did not view heresy or apostasy in and of itself as negating the offender's status as a Jew. Indeed, Jewish status could never be canceled, even for the most heinous offenses against Jewish law and doctrine. It is against this background that the tannaitic reaction to the rise of Christianity must be viewed.

While our sources point to general adherence to Jewish law and practice by the earliest Christians, we must also remember that some deviance from the norms of the tannaim must have occurred already at the earliest period. Indeed, the sayings attributed by the Gospels to Jesus would lead us to believe that he may have taken a view of the *halakhah* that was different from that of the Pharisees. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the halakhic material discussed thus far, the tannaim did not see the earliest Christians as constituting a separate religious community.

Even if we were to accept many of the polemical statements in our sources at face value and assume the violations of *halakhah* in the early Christian community to be more extensive, the early Christians would still be considered Jews. Nor should we assume that the

In CVIII, Justin accuses the Jews of cursing both **Jesus** and those who believe in him.<sup>53</sup> Finally he appeals to the Jews in CXXXVII not to revile **Jesus**:<sup>54</sup>

As the rulers of your synagogues teach you, after the prayer.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that these passages are a polemical and confused reflection of the recitation of the *birkat ha-minim* in the synagogues of Palestine (Justin grew up in Samaria). These passages present evidence that some version of the benediction was already recited in the mid-second century C.E. and that it included explicit reference to the Christians.

Similar testimony comes from Origen (c. 185–c. 254 C.E.), who accuses Jews of blaspheming and cursing **Jesus**<sup>55</sup> and in another passage says:<sup>56</sup>

Enter the synagogue of the Jews and see **Jesus** flagellated by those with the language of blasphemy.

It has been rightly observed, however, that this passage makes no explicit mention of the cursing of the Christians or of the role of such cursing in Jewish liturgy.<sup>57</sup>

Explicit reference, however, comes from Epiphanius and Jerome. Epiphanius (c. 315–403 C.E.), speaking of the Nazoraeans, a Judaizing Christian sect, says:<sup>58</sup>

. . . the people also stand up in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, three times a day and they pronounce curses and maledictions over them when they say their prayers in the synagogues. Three times a day they say: "May God curse the Nazoraeans."

The Bar Kokhba Revolt did much, however, to highlight the emerging separation of the Christians from the Jewish community. It is certain that among the factors contributing to both the popular and Rabbinic support enjoyed by Bar Kokhba was the view of some who saw Bar Kokhba as a Messianic figure.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some of the leaders of the earlier revolt against Rome (66–74 C.E.) had also been seen in the same light.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Jewish Christians did not support Bar Kokhba and refused to participate in the rebellion. After all, **Jesus** was their savior, so they could not fight on behalf of another Messiah.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, they probably took the view later expressed by the church fathers that the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea in the Great Revolt of 66–74 C.E. was a just punishment for the Jewish rejection of the Messiahship of **Jesus**. According to later accounts preserved in the church fathers, the refusal to support

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כח עמוד ב

תנו רבנן: שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה. אמר להם רבן גמליאל לחכמים: כלום יש אדם שיודע לתקן ברכת המינים? עמד שמואל הקטן ותקנה, לשנה אחרת שכחה.

רב קוק, עין איה

א"ל ר"ג לחכמים כלום יש אדם שיודע לתקן ברכת המינים. הברכות של כלל התפילה שהן מלאות בחסד ואהבה, כל אדם חכם הראוי למעלה רוממה כזאת ראוי הוא לערוך תפילות קבועות לגוי קדוש ועם חכם ונבון. אמנם התפילה שבתוכה אצור שנאה ומשטמה, צריכה לבא דוקא מלב שכולו טהור וקודש לד', שטבע השנאה אין בלבבו כלל, ורק מפני התכלית הכללי שחסר לצאת ע"י תקלת הרשעים המכשילים יעתר אל ד' להרוג אותם, אבל אם ישאר בלבבו איזה רגש כ"ד של שנאה טבעית, מפני ההתנגדות הטבעית שאף שהיא קודש לד' בהתחלתה, מ"מ תגבר בלב להיות ג"כ לשנאה טבעית חוץ משורת השכל. והנה עמד שמואל הקטן ותקנה, ורק הוא באמת ראוי לה, כי הוא האיש אשר דרש תמיד בנפול אויבך אל תשמח וגו', והסיר כל רגש שנאה מלבבו גם לשונאי נפשו, והוא כשיתעורר לתקן ברכה למינים, לא תמצא בה כ"א רגשי לב טהור לתכלית הטוב האמיתי הכללי.

## Langer and Ulrich, The Earliest Texts of the Birkat Haminim

### SCHOLARLY DISCUSSIONS

In 1898, Solomon Schechter published the first findings from the Cairo geniza, revolutionizing the study of Jewish liturgy.<sup>4</sup> In this short article, he included a selection of prayers of a rite, until then unknown. Scholars quickly came to recognize this as the rite of *'ereš yisra'el*.<sup>5</sup> This rite, although adhering to the basic structures and ideas of known rabbinic liturgy, differed significantly in its precise formulations of the individual prayers. Included among Schechter's geniza fragments were two versions of the *birkat haminim*, both of them deviating in significant ways from the familiar versions of the prayer. Although Schechter did not comment upon this in his brief article, most striking to his readers was that these versions of the *birkat haminim* explicitly included among the malefactors being cursed *nošerim*, the common Hebrew term for Christians. Many through the centuries had understood the prayer to have been anti-Christian in its origins and ongoing intent. Scholars were aware that the Church fathers, and especially Justin Martyr (d. c. 165),<sup>6</sup> accused Jews of cursing Christians during prayers, and that Epiphanius (d. 403) and Jerome (d. 420) specifically identify this as a curse against Nazarenes, suggesting that the *berakhah* had included somewhere an explicit reference to *nošerim*.<sup>7</sup> However, no previously discovered liturgical text of the blessing had included this precise language.

The earliest texts of the *birkat haminim* seem also to have included a curse of *nošerim* and *minim*, applying a single verb, יאבדו (may they be lost) to both. Whether or not these were initially two discrete categories of people is unclear. These terms are already attested to by the Church fathers Jerome and Epiphanius, around 400 C.E., who tell us that Jews were cursing Christians, three times a day in their synagogues, referring to Christians or Jewish-Christians as Nazarenes in a blessing called "Minaeorum."<sup>12,3</sup> The formulation of this segment in the geniza texts is extremely stable, always placing *nošerim* before *minim*. Consequently, it is logical to conclude that the word *nošerim* is not a later addition to this phrase (as has been suggested by some scholars)<sup>12,4</sup> but rather an integral part

### Rambam on Jesus

#### **משנה תורה, הלכות מלכים ומלחמות ל"א:ט'**

(ט) וכשיעמוד המלך המשיח באמת, ויצליח וירום וינשא--מיד הם כולן חוזרין ויודעים ששקר נחלו אבותיהם, ושנביאיהם ואבותיהם הטעום.  
 (י) אף ישוע הנוצרי שדמה שיהיה משיח ונהרג בבית דין, כבר נתנבא בו דניאל שנאמר "ובני פריצי עמך ינשאו להעמיד חזון ונכשל" וכי יש מכשל גדול מזה שכל הנביאים דברו ששיח גואל ישראל ומושיעם, ומקבץ נדחים ומחזק מצותן, וזה גרם לאבד ישראל בחרב, ולפזר שאריתם ולהשפילם ולהחלק התורה, ולהטעות רוב העולם לעבוד אלוק מבלעדי ה'



## Modern Day Debates

### Rav Aharon Soloveitchik

"To my great dismay. . . publications affiliated with the Lubavitch movement have persisted in stating that I validate their belief that a Jewish Messiah may be resurrected from the dead. I completely reject and vigorously deny any such claim. As I have already stated publicly. . . such a belief is repugnant to Judaism and is the antithesis of the truth. My intent in signing the original letter . . . was merely to express my opinion that we should not label subscribers to these beliefs as heretics. Any statements in that letter which imply an endorsement of their view were not shown to me at the time I signed and I once again repudiate any such ridiculous claim."

### Rambam, Mishneh Torah Laws of Kings

11:4-5

If a king will arise from the House of David who delves deeply into the study of the Torah and, like David his ancestor, observes its mitzvos as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law; if he will compel all of Israel to walk in [the way of the Torah] and repair the breaches [in its observance]; and if he will fight the wars of G-d –he is presumed to be Moshiach. If he succeeds in the above, builds the Beis Hamikdash on its site, and gathers in the dispersed remnant of Israel, he is definitely the Moshiach. He will then perfect the entire world, [motivating all the nations] to serve G-d together, as it is written (Zephaniah 3:9), "I will make the peoples pure of speech so that they will all call upon the Name of G-d and serve Him with one purpose." But if he did not succeed in all this or was killed, he is definitely not the Moshiach promised in the Torah... and G-d only appointed him in order to test the masses.

### Part III – Can a Dead Human Being be the Messiah?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rebbe,\\_the\\_Messiah,\\_and\\_the\\_Scandal\\_of\\_Orthodox\\_Indifference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rebbe,_the_Messiah,_and_the_Scandal_of_Orthodox_Indifference)

Berger, an academic expert on Jewish responses to Christianity, particularly [claims of Jesus' messiahship and divinity](#), criticized what he viewed as similar assertions made by some religious leaders of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement about Schneerson shortly after Schneerson's death in 1994 and even in 2014.<sup>[3][4]</sup> Berger argues that the assertion a person could begin a messianic mission, die, and posthumously return to complete his mission has been unanimously rejected by the Sages and Jewish polemicists for nearly 2,000 years. An example of Berger's proof-texts is the passage in the [Talmud](#) which shows that [Rabbi Akiva](#) set aside his previous assertions of [Simon bar Kokhba's](#) presumed messiahship after bar Kokhba was put to death. To Berger, the Messianists' viewpoint on this issue is outside the pale of accepted Orthodox Jewish belief. Berger has been highly disappointed by the Orthodox establishment's reaction to Chabad-Lubavitch's claims that Schneerson is the [Jewish messiah](#), arguing that there is a "scandal of Orthodox indifference".

### Gil Student

The Rambam's definition of a failed Moshiach is quoted above from halachah 5. Note that the Rambam says "did not succeed... or was killed" so someone's not succeeding in completing the messianic task is sufficient to disqualify him from being Moshiach. But how can the Rambam list not accomplishing these five items as rendering someone definitely not Moshiach? Maybe he will be resurrected and finish these tasks? Or maybe he will complete them in his trips to this world from under the Seat of Glory? No one can ever fall into this category if the Moshiach can come back from the dead and finish his messianic tasks. We must say that, according to the Rambam, Moshiach cannot come back from the dead to complete the criteria.

He initiated an unparalleled tshuvah movement that brought many, many Jews back to observance. He fought the spiritual battles of G-d against assimilation and secularism by sending out mitzvah tanks and armies of youths. Thus, these people conclude, he is at least bechezkas Moshiach. Some will even claim that he accomplished 4 and 5. He built a monumental holy place – 770 – in his place and helped bring about the mass immigration of Russian Jews to Israel. Thus, these people argue, the Rebbe is not only bechezkas Moshiach, he is vadai Moshiach.

Yet, there are problems with this theory. First of all, none of these tasks are done. The Rebbe did not fully succeed in any of these. There is still monumental ignorance and lack of observance among Jews throughout the world and Israel is still under siege by terrorists and Arab armies. The Temple Mount remains under Arab control and the majority of Jews still reside outside of Israel. The Rebbe's accomplishments were glorious and awe-inspiring. However, they were not sufficient to fit the Rambam's criteria for Moshiach. In fact, the Rebbe has not fulfilled any of the criteria for being Moshiach except being a Torah scholar and religious man. Let us look at the criteria again:

1. Compel all of Israel to walk in the way of Torah

2. Repair the breaches in observance
3. Fight the wars of G-d

Furthermore, it is a basic rule of learning that the Rambam was very precise with his language. **As many will argue regarding the difference between “to die” and “to be killed”, we must read each of the Rambam’s words with great care.** The Rambam writes that in order to be bechezkas Moshiach one must be a king from the house of David. Only by a wild stretch of the imagination – and a careless reading of the Rambam – can the Rebbe be considered to have been a king. Contrast this with Bar Kochba for whom there is archaeological evidence that he ruled as a king and was punctilious in his observance of mitzvos. The Rambam also says that one who is bechezkas Moshiach will fight the wars of G-d. In which battle did the Rebbe fight in the army? In fact, the Rebbe wrote in Likkutei Sichos vol. 16 pp. 304-305 n. 49 that the Rambam’s language here of “fight the wars of G-d” means literal wars including the destruction of Amalek.

It is not merely a figure of speech. But the Rebbe did not fight a war and did not destroy Amalek. The Rambam’s definition of a failed Moshiach is quoted above from halachah 5. Note that the Rambam says “did not succeed... or was killed” so someone’s not succeeding in completing the messianic task is sufficient to disqualify him from being Moshiach. But how can the Rambam list not accomplishing these five items as rendering someone definitely not Moshiach? Maybe he will be resurrected and finish these tasks? Or maybe he will complete them in his trips to this world from under the Seat of Glory? No one can ever fall into this category if the Moshiach can come back from the dead and finish his messianic tasks. We must say that, according to the Rambam, Moshiach cannot come back from the dead to complete the criteria. Otherwise, half of this halachah is impossible. We would never be able to declare someone who is bechezkas Moshiach as being definitely not the promised Moshiach for not succeeding. If we allow for the possibility that someone can come back to this world and finish these tasks, then we have nullified the Rambam’s words in this halacha. Rather, when someone who is bechezkas Moshiach dies we unfortunately discover for certain that he is not Moshiach.

**Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Hillel**

youth. That Jesus would have been familiar with Hillel—and with some of his more famous teachings—can be assumed.

Comparisons between teachings of Hillel and Jesus can be beneficial for Jews as well, because it is quite possible that, in later centuries, anxiety about the revolution wrought in Jesus name spawned anxiety about those aspects of Hillel's teachings—the extraordinary openness to converts and the emphasis on loving and just behavior as God's central demand—that, though older than Christianity, suddenly sounded strangely un-Jewish.

It was perhaps in response to Jesus' emphasis on faith and love, and Paul's decision several decades later to drop the requirement to observe Torah laws,<sup>1</sup> that many Jews came to focus Jewish religiosity on laws, specifically the ritual laws that most differentiated Jews from Gentiles. For example, if two Jews are speaking about a third, and the question “Is so-

two Jews are speaking about a third, and the question “Is so-and-so religious?” is raised, the answer is based exclusively on the person's level of ritual observance. Such a standard is, of course, precisely the opposite of what Hillel taught about Judaism's essence.

All of this is not meant to suggest that Hillel was not concerned with ritual observance. He was. Very. Indeed, most of the disputes between Shammai and him and among their disciples were on matters of ritual law. He simply deemed Judaism's ethical demands to be foremost in significance, and it is one of the paradoxes of history that the very power of Hillel's moral teaching, having likely affected Jesus, his disciples, and the religion founded in his name, might have been

responsible for provoking an anxiety about those very teachings in Jews who felt threatened by the rise and growing popularity of Christianity—a feeling that intensified after Christianity had done away with the legal structure of the Torah and started to hold Jews accountable for their savior's death.