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Gavin Mcdowell

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MURCIA, Thierry, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne* (Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme), Brepols, Turnhout, 2014, 810 p. ISBN 978-2-503-55215-6

Jesus in the Talmud has been the subject of several studies, although very few have appeared since the 1950s. T. Murcia's *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne* is therefore significant as the first major in-depth study of this subject in recent memory. This work brings the history of research on this subject up-to-date and provides some important correctives to past research. The author is notably critical of Peter Schäfer's slim volume *Jesus in the Talmud* (2007), which regards the Talmudic passages as parodic counter-narratives in the tradition of the *Toledot Yeshu*. He also opposes the point of view of Johann Maier's *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung* (1978), which denies that the Talmudic literature contains any authentic reference to the Jesus of Christianity. Instead, he argues that in most cases the Talmudic literature does refer to this Jesus and that the Talmudic discourse about Jesus is distinct from the rhetoric of the *Toledot Yeshu*.

This 810-page opus is a veritable encyclopedia of Jesus in Talmudic literature, which, for the author, includes the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the two Talmudim (Yerushalmi and Bavli). He expressly excludes *Toledot Yeshu* from the rabbinic corpus, although he frequently refers to this work as well. The book is divided into fifteen chapters in four parts, not including the introduction and conclusion. There are also ten tables scattered throughout the chapters, and an index with the seventy-nine texts examined throughout the book in their original language. The book is organized so as to distinguish the Palestinian and Babylonian sources about Jesus. Consequently, the chapters tend to progress from older to newer sources. That is, Parts One and Two focus on Jesus in the Tosefta and the Yerushalmi, while Parts Three and Four discuss the Jesus passages from the much later Talmud Bavli.

Part One focuses on the reputation of Jesus "ben Pandera" as a healer. The first chapter, among the best in the book, discusses the epithet "ben Pandera," universally found in Jewish literature as well as in Celsus' tract against Christianity, as quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum*. The author concludes that the name is not a polemically-motivated invention and suggests that Pandera may have been a second, Greek name for Joseph. Chapters two through four all involve stories about healers who invoke the name of Jesus. Chapter two treats the story of the mysterious Jacob "the *Min*," a disciple of Jesus, and the unfortunate Eliezer b. Dama, who dies from a snakebite before he can contract Jacob's services. Chapter three is about an anonymous healer who cures in the name of Jesus. Chapter four returns to the subject of Jacob and his treatment of the leg of R. Abbahu.

Part Two deals with references to the Gospel in rabbinic literature. Chapter five involves yet another story of Jacob and his encounter with R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus. Chapter six treats allusions to the word "Gospel" in rabbinic literature, including the pun on the word *Evangelion* as 'aven gillayon or 'avon gillayon, the "false margin" or the "margin of iniquity." Chapter seven studies a story about R. Gamaliel and his sister Imma Shalom, which involves a citation from the 'avon gillayon.

Part Three finally turns to stories that touch directly on the life of Jesus. Chapter eight investigates the passages about Ben Stada, the magician and madman who is identified with Jesus in the Bavli but, notably, not in the Tosefta or in the Yerushalmi. The author concludes that the traditions about Jesus and Ben Stada were only intermingled at a relatively late date. Chapter nine focuses on the story of Jesus' flight to Egypt with his teacher Joshua b. Perahyah, recounted twice in the Bavli, which the author also regards as a late invention, in part because the parallel passages in the Yerushalmi do not mention either man. One of the important conclusions of this chapter is that the abbreviated name "Yeshu" is not a veiled insult in the Talmud (as it certainly is in *Toledot Yeshu*). Chapter ten deals with the execution of Jesus as recounted in the Bavli, which, again, the author regards as late and in part influenced by the Christian practice of Lent (here, Jesus is executed forty days after his sentencing). Chapter eleven deals with the trial and execution of five of Jesus' disciples.

Part Four is entirely consecrated to the intersection of Jesus and Balaam traditions. Chapter twelve is a brief history of the development of the character of Balaam from the Deir 'Alla inscription to the New Testament. Chapter thirteen treats Balaam in early rabbinic tradition as the model biblical villain. Chapter fourteen addresses the notorious story of Balaam and Jesus in hell, where Jesus' particular punishment is to sit in burning excrement. T. Murcia attacks P. Schäfer's interpretation of this episode as an inversion of the Eucharist; rather, the excrement represents Jesus' teaching, which contradicted and ridiculed the teaching of the rabbinic Sages. Chapter fifteen treats the "Balaam cycle" of *b. Sanhedrin* 105a-106b and its *rapport* with Jesus and Christianity. The author underlines that Balaam in the Talmud is distinct from Jesus, yet Balaam can also serve as a "type" of Jesus.

The impression left by T. Murcia's study is that the early rabbinic tradition has a relatively neutral position on Jesus, who is recognized as a Jew and distinguished as a thaumaturge. On the other hand, the passages about Jesus in the Talmud Bavli are, like Thomas Hobbes' characterisation of the human condition, nasty, brutish, and short. The author is at pains to show that in each case these passages are comparatively late, absolving the earlier rabbis of having any particular vendetta against Jesus. He also emphasizes that the Talmudic passages about Jesus are not a parody of the Gospel story, although they might reflect some knowledge of contemporary Christianity. In general, the Sages refer to Jesus as one of their own, albeit one who went astray.

As the description of the contents should make clear, a good portion of the book is not actually dedicated to the subject of Jesus. The passages touching on Jesus' life appear only in the Bavli and are discussed only in the second half of the book. The first half dedicates more space to Jacob the *Min* than Jesus himself. Readers might find themselves skipping ahead to get to the "good parts." In addition, the chapters treating Jacob are divided between Parts One and Two, and it is difficult to understand why chapters six and seven are in the book at all, since the passages discussed do not concern Jesus.

Another criticism involves the author's perspective on *Toledot Yeshu*. While I do not criticize his decision to leave *Toledot Yeshu* out of the study, I do question his decision to categorically exclude *Toledot Yeshu* from "rabbinic" literature, which seems to be a hasty judgment. The

Talmud Bavli and the *Toledot Yeshu* have a complicated relationship, as the author acknowledges (p. 678), and the direction of influence between the two is unclear. The definitive study elucidating the exact nature of their relationship remains to be written.

The book's greatest merit is its exhaustiveness, both in the treatment of its subject and in the documentation of its sources. In each chapter, readers will not only find T. Murcia's own informative arguments, but a concise summary of preceding scholarship and an ample bibliography. The book is effectively a signpost for all other avenues of research relating to its subject. It was immediately helpful in my own research. Scholars investigating Jesus in the Talmud should start here.

G. MCDOWELL
École pratique des hautes études (Paris)