

**REVIEW**

Peter Schäfer

*The Jewish Jesus:*

*How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other*

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Mark Nussberger, Independent Scholar

In his latest book, Peter Schäfer, one of the world's foremost scholars of rabbinic Judaism, makes his own contribution to the ongoing reconceptualization of ancient Jewish-Christian relations, in part responding to the work of scholars such as Daniel Boyarin and Adiel Schremer. According to Schäfer, "we have all learned by now that the old model of the 'parting of the ways' of Judaism and Christianity needs to be abandoned in favor of a much more differentiated and sophisticated model, taking into consideration a long process of mutual demarcation *and* absorption" (p. 84). His main thesis, as the subtitle of the book indicates, is that one should understand the two "sister religions" (p. 1) of "Judaism" and "Christianity" not as "static entities forever confronting each other," but rather as "vital, dynamic forces in constant exchange with each other" (p. 271). Schäfer develops his "more differentiated and sophisticated model" by focusing in the first seven chapters on "debates about the rabbinic concept of God, his unity and uniqueness, and his relationship with other (prospective) divine powers" (p. 8). In the two concluding chapters, he shifts away from rabbinic debates about "monotheism" to texts that reflect specifically upon the Jewish Messiah, both as endangered infant (in the Palestinian Talmud) and suffering servant (in Pesiqta Rabbati), in light of Christian conceptions of Jesus.

Contrary to what one might expect upon first reading the title *The Jewish Jesus*, Schäfer's topic is by no means Jesus, the first-century C.E. Jew. Rather, that seemingly innocuous

phrase encapsulates a provocative argument: Not only did Jewish ideas such as “Wisdom” (*hokhmah*) and the “Word” (*logos*) influence early Christology (as is commonly recognized), but also “certain Jewish groups”—tapping into “theological possibilities inherent in ancient Judaism”—“elevated figures such as Adam, the angels, David and above all Metatron to divine status, *responding*... to the Christian elevation of Jesus” (pp. 10 and 17, emphasis added). In turn, other Jews—the rabbis who became the dominant and normative voices of the tradition—rejected such “(semi-)divine powers” (p. 10), at least in part to distance their own nascent community from early Christian groups (e.g., pp. 53–54). Schäfer discerns evidence for those Jewish rivals to Jesus, and thus for the existence of *minim* (“heretics”) both within and outside emerging rabbinic Judaism, through a close historical-critical reading of rabbinic texts.

In pointed contrast to the recent work of Daniel Boyarin and Moshe Idel, Schäfer places great hermeneutical weight on his distinguishing between the Palestinian and Babylonian socio-historical contexts of this varied literature. The Palestinian Jewish community, living under Roman rule, “witnessed Christianity *in statu nascendi*, that is, during its [extended] birthing process” (pp. 214–15). Most Palestinian sources “are dealing with less specified and more amorphous [Christian theological] ideas that are still emerging and have not yet crystallized into their final form” (p. 81). Babylonian Jews, on the other hand, living under Sassanian rule as a “rather privileged minority” (p. 140), are confronted with a more developed form of Christianity against which they articulate more explicit polemics. The Babylonian Talmud and elements of the Hekhalot literature (like the David Apocalypse and 3 Enoch) even presuppose “knowledge of the New Testament as a canonic[al] text” (p. 81). “Differences matter” for Schäfer (p. 1), whether distinctions between Palestine and Babylonia, or—despite the evidence of “mutual absorption” (p. 84) and “constant exchange” (p. 271)—the boundaries between early Judaism and ancient Christianity.

Schäfer's most compelling examples of the significance of the distinction between Palestine and Babylonia concern rabbinic discussions of the Davidic Messiah and the high angel Metatron. Regarding the former, Schäfer persuasively argues (*pace* Boyarin) that the rejection of R. Aqiva's interpretation of Daniel 7:9 in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanh. 38b) evinces a more distinct polemic against Christianity "in its very essence" (p. 81) than the rejection of a "two powers" heresy in an earlier *Palestinian* text that also refers to Daniel 7:9 (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, ba-hodesh 5 and shirata 4). With respect to Metatron, Schäfer observes that "most if not all of the unquestionable Metatron traditions—that is, traditions referring to the angel Metatron as a potential divine or semidivine being threatening the unique position of God in heaven—appear only in the Bavli and the Hekhalot literature" (p. 138). The latter texts reached their final form in the sixth or seventh century (or even later), after the ecumenical Christian councils that defined orthodox trinitarian theology. Schäfer concludes from the provenance of those texts, as well as from the structural similarities between Metatron traditions such as 3 Enoch and expressions of early Christology like Phil 2:6–11 and Heb 1:1–4, that the figure of Metatron is "an *answer* to the New Testament's message of Jesus Christ" (p. 143).

*The Jewish Jesus* is a rich and thought-provoking book to which this brief review cannot do full justice. Judging from Schäfer's frequent use of undefined, technical vocabulary such as *sugya*, *petiḥa*, and *baraitha*, his intended audience seems to be those already familiar with the study of rabbinic texts. However, non-specialists, even advanced undergraduates and graduate students, should not be deterred from grappling with his nuanced arguments for the complexity of ancient Jewish-Christian relations. From Schäfer's insightful analyses of rabbinic biblical interpretation in various midrashim and his examination of artifacts such as Babylonian incantation bowls to his discussion of binitarian (and trinitarian) theologies in light of Diocletian's reform of the Roman imperial hierarchy, there is much of interest here for scholars of ancient Judaism

and ancient Christianity, as well as for historical theologians and biblical scholars.