The search for traces of Jesus and Christianity in rabbinic writings has a long tradition. The medieval disputations on the Talmud—Paris 1240, Barcelona 1263, and again Paris 1268—were based on the Christian accusation that rabbinic texts blasphemed Jesus and Christianity, or, on the contrary, contained evidence that the rabbis themselves recognized the validity of the Christian message. In the aftermath of these disputations, relevant rabbinic texts were collected and translated, thus already in the context of the first disputation of Paris and then above all by Ramón Martí after the disputation of Barcelona (Capistrum Iudaeorum; Pugio Fidei).

Nearly all later books on the topic until the nineteenth century stand in this tradition. Since the middle of the nineteenth century a new systematic search for rabbinic texts on the topic was undertaken by Christian and Jewish scholars. The most important authors on the Christian side were Heinrich Laible, R. Travers Herford and Hermann L. Strack; on the Jewish side at least Abraham Geiger, Samuel Krauss,
and Josef Klausner should be mentioned. The intentions behind these studies were not at all uniform; some Christians searched for traces of the historical Jesus, others for a better understanding of the New Testament or materials for the aims of the Christian mission among the Jews. Many Jewish authors were rather apologetic; others interpreted these texts in the larger context of the more general history of religions in late antiquity or understood certain developments within Judaism as reactions against Christianity. Some were maximalists, finding traces of Christianity in a high number of texts; others took a more sober approach for different, mainly apologetic, reasons. Common to them all is the rather uncritical acceptance of the historical reliability of rabbinic traditions, as was the usual scholarly standard of the age. Some authors at least distinguished between tannaitic and amoraic texts; but the characterization of a text as a baraita was generally taken as a sign of tannaitic origin even when the text was transmitted only in the Babylonian Talmud or in late midrashim.

The history of research has been most thoroughly treated by Johann Maier who in his two volumes on the topic offered a new comprehensive study of all rabbinic texts which had been connected with Jesus or with Christian traditions. J. Maier dissected all texts with the highest critical acumen and demonstrated the fallacies of earlier research. In his view, hardly any rabbinic text originally spoke of Jesus of Nazareth. Wherever his name appears in manuscripts and editions, it is for Maier a late addition; other texts, e.g. those that mention Ben Pantera, originally referred to somebody else although already Celsus in the second century knew of Jewish rumors that Jesus’ real father was a Roman soldier named Pantera. Most texts which have been understood as reactions to Christian doctrines are according to J. Maier better understood within Jewish tradition and inner-Jewish discussions.

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