THE STERN MASTER AND HIS WAYWARD DISCIPLE:
A ‘JESUS’ STORY IN THE TALMUD AND IN CHRISTIAN HAGIOGRAPHY

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Among the Talmudic accounts of the putative founders of the Pharisaic movement there is a well-known anecdote, which relates, in a vivid fashion, the falling out between one of these masters and his unworthy disciple. The story, in brief, goes as follows. During the return to Jerusalem, after a temporary sojourn (enforced or voluntary) in Alexandria, the master and his entourage stop at an inn, where they are very hospitably received. Upon departure the master makes an ambiguously phrased remark, which could be interpreted as paying a compliment to the attractive appearance of the hostess responsible for the reception of the travellers. The disciple, supposedly misunderstanding the intent and the words of the master, objects and says that the eyes of the lady in question were, in some way, defective. The master is of course scandalized by the disciple’s presumptuous comment, which betrays all too profane preoccupations, administers a stinging rebuke, and drives him away. The upshot of the estrangement, provoked by a seemingly minor matter, is either the irreversible apostasy of the disciple or, in another account, his immediate demise.

In one version, in the Palestinian Talmud\(^1\), the master is iden-

\(^1\) Y. Hagiga 2,2 (77d); text printed in H.L. Strack, Jesus, die Häretiker und die Christen nach den ältesten jüdischen Angaben (Leipzig, 1910), pp. 9-10, with variants from the one complete manuscript of the Palestinian Talmud, Leiden Scaliger 3 (saec. XIII), given in the notes (siglum “Lugd”). The parallel account in the vulgate text of y. Sanhedrin 6, 8 (23c) abruptly breaks off with the plea of the inhabitants of Jerusalem for the return of the master (see op.cit., p. 10, note d); the important Sanhedrin fragment which was published some years ago, from a 12th-cent. North African manuscript, continues the narrative with a wording which is substantially that of the Hagiga text, with some in fact superior readings (M. Assis (ed.), “A Fragment of Yerushalmi Sanhedrin,” Tarbiz 46 (1977), p. 82,
tified as Judah ben Tabbai (late second-early first cent. B.C.), but the disciple in unnamed. In another version, in the Babylonian Talmud\(^2\), the master is Joshua ben Perahyah (second half of the


\(^2\) b. Sanhedrin 107b, ed. L. GOLDSCHMIDT, Der Babylonische Talmud, vol. 7 (The Hague, 1933), p. 480, lines 16 ff., text also in STRACK op. cit., pp. 10-11; b. Sota 47a, ed. GOLDSCHMIDT, op. cit., vol. 5 (The Hague, 1933), p. 343, lines 14 ff. and STRACK, op. cit., p. 11, with variants from Monac. hebr. hebr. 95 (saec. XIV), the one fairly complete manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud, cited in the notes (siglum “M”). The b. Sanh. passage is also readily accessible in R. RABBINOVITZ, Variae lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum ... pars IX (Mainz, 1878), p. 339, line 4-p. 340, line 3. As a matter of interest it may be noted that the Sota passage was already separately printed (from the popular 16th-cent. anthology of haggadic texts from the Babylonian Talmud called ה集团股份, “Jacob’s Spring”) by the Christian Hebraist J.C. WAGENSEIL (Sota. Hoc est Liber Mischnicus de uxore adulterii suspensa cum Libri En Jacob excerptis Gemarae ... (Altdorf, 1687), p. 1050). A. Liss has now provided an editio maior of b. Sota, with a full apparatus of the readings of the manuscripts and the testimony of post-Talmudic literature (The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings ... Tractate Sotah, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1977-79); for our passage see vol. 2, p. 300, line 4—p. 303, line 3). A MAYER provides a synoptic translation of the b. Sanh., b. Sota and y. Hag. versions (apud E. HENNECKE, Handbuch zu den neustamentlichen Apokryphen (Tübingen 1901), pp. 57-58). H. STOURDZÉ adduces several instances where the Sota version, upon being compared to the Sanhedrin text, seems to show signs of secondary stylistic amelioration and to represent a later stage of redaction (“La fuite en Egypte de Josué b. Perahya et l’incident avec son prétendu disciple Jésus,” Revue des études juives 82 (1926), pp. 135-36). In one instance, however, b. Sota appears to draw on another source, namely for the detail that Simeon b. Šetah was hidden by his sister (יוסףتوות אשתו); but it is not said that Simeon’s sister was in fact the queen, Alexandra Salome, wife of Alexander Jannaeus. This family relationship is asserted (rightly?) in b. Ber. 48a and some midrashic texts. For a useful tabular comparison of the b. Sanh. and b. Sota versions see J. MAIER, Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung (Darmstadt, 1978), pp. 118-21; MAIER’s far-ranging text-critical combinations must be revised in the light of D. GOLDENBERG’s trenchant critique and presentation of additional material (“Once More: Jesus in the Talmud,” The Jewish Quarterly Review 73 (1982), pp. 79-80). Rather strangely, NEUSNER takes as the basis for his recent translation of b. Sota a censored edition which omits the passage of interest altogether (The Talmud of Babylonia. An American Translation XVII. Tractate Sotah (Chico, 1984), p. 269)—though he elsewhere reproduces in