



# The Virgin Birth of Jesus in the Talmudic Context

## A Philological and Historical Analysis

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article se propose d'étudier les conceptions talmudiques relatives à la croyance chrétienne en la conception et en la naissance virgine de Jésus. L'approche consiste principalement en une étude philologique et historique du cognomen *ben Pantera* affilié à Jésus dans de nombreux textes talmudiques principalement tannaitiques. On propose de voir dans le nom *ben Pantera* une raillerie à l'encontre de la croyance chrétienne en la conception et en la naissance virgine de Jésus. L'accusation d'union illégitime énoncée et véhiculée en monde juif ainsi qu'en monde païen se retrouve dans la littérature talmudique. Le christianisme y est souvent assimilé à la séduction exercée par la prostitution. Ainsi, c'est à un même univers conceptuel qu'il convient de se référer dans l'étude de cette question : la relation dialectique entre l'attraction exercée par le christianisme et celle exercée par la prostituée, dans le processus historique de séparation entre juifs et chrétiens.

# THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS IN THE TALMUDIC CONTEXT

## A PHILOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS\*

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*RÉSUMÉ : Cet article se propose d'étudier les conceptions talmudiques relatives à la croyance chrétienne en la conception et en la naissance virginale de Jésus. L'approche consiste principalement en une étude philologique et historique du cognomen ben Pantera affilié à Jésus dans de nombreux textes talmudiques principalement tannaitiques. On propose de voir dans le nom ben Pantera une raillerie à l'encontre de la croyance chrétienne en la conception et en la naissance virginale de Jésus. L'accusation d'union illégitime énoncée et véhiculée en monde juif ainsi qu'en monde païen se retrouve dans la littérature talmudique. Le christianisme y est souvent assimilé à la séduction exercée par la prostitution. Ainsi, c'est à un même univers conceptuel qu'il convient de se référer dans l'étude de cette question : la relation dialectique entre l'attirance exercée par le christianisme et celle exercée par la prostituée, dans le processus historique de séparation entre juifs et chrétiens.*

*ABSTRACT : This article proposes a philological and historic analysis of the Talmudic name Ben Pantera. It is suggested that this ancient expression has to be understood as corresponding to a period in which the Jews wished to think of Christianity, choosing the person of Jesus as an emblematic figure of this reality. The expression Ben Pantera expresses mockery and even scorn towards Jesus. It must be placed back in a period in which, on account of the doctrinal controversies between Jews and Christians, the two religions had consummated a Parting of the Ways and acknowledged each other as rivals. Thus, Ben Pantera appears to be the oldest mention of Jesus in the Talmudic literature.*

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“Yeshu(a) ben Pantera” is one of the names used in Talmudic literature to designate Jesus of Nazareth. This cryptic name, mainly used in Palestinian texts, has been the object of much research. No solution, however, is regarded as definitive as yet.<sup>1</sup>

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\* The author wishes to thank the two anonymous readers of his article for their suggestions and their important comments.

1. One finds various forms of this cryptogram, such as : *pantera* ; *pandira* ; *pandera* ; *pantira* ; *panteri*. All of these names designate Jesus of Nazareth in Talmudic literature. They are, however, different in the way they are transliterated, especially because of slight differences in spelling, for example the addition of a *yod* before the last syllable.

To what historical reality does this term bear witness ? Does it illustrate a tacit Jewish polemic against Jesus and Christianity ? Or does it bear witness to nomenclature peculiar to Talmudic literature, whose obscure origin has been lost ?

After surveying earlier research and providing perspective on the difficulties that this name bears with it, the present study offers a new effort at interpretation.

## I. THE STATE OF RESEARCH

In a rather old but still important study, H. Laible suggested that the term Πανθήρα (*Pantera*) refers to a Roman soldier, Mary's lover and the true father of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Hence Jesus would be the product of an illicit union, making him an illegitimate child.

In a long study of the Jews in patristic literature, Samuel Krauss analyzed a passage in *Sifre* on Deut. 32:20, which suggests the following interpretation :

*I will see what their end shall be* — I will inform them of their fate — *for they are a very forward generation* — neither “a generation which is inverted” nor “a generation which shall be overturned” is written here, but *a very forward generation* — they are fickle, they are perfidious.<sup>3</sup>

According to Krauss, the Hebrew word *pornim* is a corrupt form of the Greek, πόρνοι, which accounts for the idea of perversion implied by this interpretation. Similarly, the Greek words πορνείον and πόρνη can also be related to Hebrew forms, being transliterations of the Greek.

Moreover, in this passage of *Sifre*, the variant reading of *pornim* produces *pardanim*, which means a vagabond, but which remains difficult to translate. According to Krauss, a phonetic phenomenon took place in this variant, with the insertion of a *da-leth* between the *resh* and the *nun*, which he regards as a process familiar to philologists. Hence, *pardanim* would be the equivalent of πόρνοι, whereas the feminine form πόρνη, would have been transformed into *pardanit*.

In his final analysis, this philologist concluded that *pandera* was connected to *pardanit*, differentiated only by the position of the second letters, *nun* and *resh* — a change that he regards as recurrent in Talmudic terminology derived from Greek. Thus *pandera* would be the equivalent of πόρνη, modified by phonetic influences. Thus, according to the final element, *yeshua ben pandera* would be interpreted to mean “the son of a prostitute,” summing up the Jewish attitude toward Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

2. Cf. H. LAIBLE, *Jesus Christus im Talmud*, Leipzig, Hinrichs (coll. “Schriften des Institutum Judaicum in Berlin”, 10), 1900<sup>2</sup>, p. 19-25.

3. Cf. *Sifre* 320 (ed. L. Finkelstein, p. 366), translation according to R. Hammer, *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 329. See S. KRAUSS, “The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 5 (1893), p. 143-144 (= J.B. AGUS, *Judaism and Christianity. Selected Accounts 1892-1962*, New York, Arno, 1973, p. 143-144).

4. Note that the Jews might well have made use of the resonance of the two terms mentioned by Origen, ἐξ παρθένου and ἐξ πορνείας in their mockery of Jesus. We will return to this question.

It must be emphasized that this philological deduction is difficult to accept, because, aside from its dependence upon conjectures without any true foundation, it considers only the word *pandera* with a *daleth* as the third letter, and not *pantera* with a *teth*.<sup>5</sup>

A. Deissmann demonstrated that Ben Pantera was a very common Roman name, widely used in the Roman armies, which explains the number of Latin inscriptions from the High Empire in which it is found. According to Deissmann, the tradition regarding Jesus' illegitimate birth was very old among the Jews, and was founded precisely on the idea of relations between a Roman soldier named Pantera and Mary, Jesus' mother.<sup>6</sup> We should also note that epitaphs have been found mentioning the family name of Pantera.<sup>7</sup>

L. Patterson suggested that in fact Pantera was not a military name but rather a first name common in the Roman army. The Jewish use of the word would probably have come into being because of the similarity in sound to the Greek term Παρθένος, meaning virgin. These circumstances would then have given rise to the legend that Jesus' mother committed adultery with a Roman soldier.<sup>8</sup>

S. Kaminski surmised that the name *yeshua ben pantera* was a corrupt form of *yeshua ben sira*. This conjecture is close to the thesis that juxtaposes *pantera* with "panther," claiming a connection between that name and the Greek word θηρὸς, meaning "savage beast." This would be an expression of violent opposition to the veneration of Jesus and his divine nature.<sup>9</sup>

One is constrained to acknowledge that these rather arbitrary linguistic connections cannot explain why the name *yeshua ben pantera* would derive from the name *yeshua ben sira*.

R. Eisler conjectured that the origin of the name Πανθήρα, deriving from Greek sources, and of *pandera*, deriving from Jewish sources, refers to the figure of the

5. Cf. L. PATTERSON, "Origin of the name Panthera," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 19 (1917), p. 79, who emphasizes that only one letter is in the same place between *pantera* and πῶρνος, so that S. Krauss' conjecture is highly unlikely, an opinion with which we must concur.

6. Cf. A. DEISSMANN, "Der Name Panthera," in C. BEZOLD, ed., *Orientalische Studien T. Nöldecke gewidmet*, Giessen, Töpelmann, 1906, p. 871-875; A. DEISSMANN, *Light from the Ancient East*, New York, Doran, 1927, p. 73-74.

7. It should be mentioned that various epitaphs of Roman soldiers show that this name was widely used, especially in inscriptions found in Germany. Cf. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XIII, 2, 7514, which refers to an archer from Sidon in Phoenicia who was probably transferred to Germany in 9 CE to continue his service there. Two other epitaphs mention the name Pantera. In the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XI, 1421, the following inscription was found in Pisa: L. OTACILIUS Q. F. PANTERA, who was probably a decurion, where as in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VII, 18 one may read the following inscription, which was found in England: L. AUFIDIUS PANTERA PRAEFECTUS CLASSIS BRITANNICAE, who was the commander of the British fleet.

8. Cf. L. PATTERSON, "Origin of the Name Panthera," p. 79-80; D. BOYARIN, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 154-155, n. 27. See also P. LEIHY, "You say Parthenos, I say Pandera: A Jewish and Christian Exegetical Interplay," *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 17 (2003), p. 80-87.

9. Cf. S. KAMINSKI, "The Origin of the Name 'Ben-Pandera,'" in M. RIBOLOV, ed., *In Honor of H. Hadoar*, New York, Ha-Histadrut ha-Ivrit beamerika Press, 1927, p. 322 (Heb).

treacherous Trojan Pandaros, who, despite the armistice, shot an arrow at Menelaos (Iliad V). The name was given to Jesus in connection with his entry into Jerusalem as “King of the Jews,” ending the peace that had existed between the Jews and the Romans since Varus and the commencement of the hostilities that eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup>

It is, however, difficult to imagine that, in a Jewish milieu, a connection would have been made between the Homeric epic of the Iliad and the person of Jesus, thus as it is improbable that reference would have been made to Pandaros in the circumstances that the Jews later had to confront.<sup>11</sup> As Maurice Goguel has noted, Eisler failed to prove that Jesus’ action was directed against the Romans. Had that been the case, the initiative for the conflict would not have belonged to Jesus but to Pontius Pilate.<sup>12</sup>

According to Joseph Klausner, the term Pantera is a corruption of Παρθένος. This semantic corruption is based on the following historical situation: during the first century, the Jews already were familiar with the Christian creed and the concepts of the virgin birth of Jesus. Hence, in derision, the Jews called Jesus “Ben Pantera,” meaning, “son of a panther.” Consequently, the son of the virgin (υἱὸς τῆς παρθένου) became, in mockery, the son of the panther (*ben pantera*).<sup>13</sup>

According to Morton Smith, this thesis is problematic, because it presupposes that in such an early time, the Jews already were familiar with the Christian belief in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus, and, it must be said that this idea is far from obvious, at least with respect to the first century in the Galilee. Smith also notes that the word Παρθένος is found in that form only once in the New Testament, in Matt. 1:23. Indeed, the term comes from the Septuagint (Is. 7:14) and can be regarded as a late gloss on the Book of Matthew.<sup>14</sup>

One must concede that Smith’s arguments are convincing, especially if one considers the linguistic distance between *pantera* and Παρθένος. It is extremely difficult to imagine that the Sages would have employed a Greek term in Hebrew translitera-

10. Cf. R. EISLER, *ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣΑΣ*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1928-1930, t. II, p. 352.

11. For another thesis associating ben Pantera with a mythological character, see the study by W. ZIFFER, “Two Epithets for Jesus of Nazareth in Talmud and Midrash,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 85 (1966), p. 356-357. It should be noticed that a Greek inscription mentioning the name Πάνδερος (Panderos) was found during the 1960s. This inscription, probably from Apamea, attests to a dedication of gratitude to Artemis from Panderos. According to A. PARROT, “Les fouilles de Mari. Quatorzième campagne (Printemps 1964),” *Syria*, 42 (1965), p. 29-30, this inscription does not predate the second century CE.

12. Cf. M. GOGUEL, *La vie de Jésus*, Paris, Payot, 1932, p. 53.

13. Cf. J. KLAUSNER, *Jésus de Nazareth. Son temps, sa vie, sa doctrine*, Paris, Payot, 1933, p. 22-23; P. CASSEL, “Caricaturamen,” in *Aus Literatur und Geschichte*, Berlin, W. Friedrich, 1885, p. 334-337, maintains that it is inconceivable that the word παρθένος could have been transformed into *pantera*. J.Z. LAUTERBACH, *Rabbinical Essays*, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1951, p. 533-535, refers to a discussion among several scholars in order to determine whether the panther is regarded as a lubricious and unfaithful animal. This was in order to establish a connection with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

14. Cf. M. SMITH, *Jesus the Magician*, New York, Harper and Row, 1978, p. 46-47.

tion with the omission of certain letters. It is much more likely that they would have had recourse to their own phraseology, used for derisive purposes.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to Jesus' ancestry and the familiar context of his birth, various hypotheses have been proposed to clarify the origin of the term *pantera*. However, these often lean upon flimsy linguistic parallels.

J.Z. Lauterbach proposes a thesis based on the relation between *pantera* and Πενθερός, meaning father-in-law or fiancé. This approach implies that Jesus was the product of a union in which Mary was betrothed but not yet married, according to the Halakha. Thus Jesus becomes the son of the fiancé or the son of the father-in-law. According to Talmudic terminology, Mary is defined as *arusa* and not as *nesuah*. In this perspective, the Hebraic term *hathan* defines a fiancé and is equivalent to the Greek word Πενθερός.<sup>16</sup>

However, this theory entails two serious difficulties :

- It has not been attested that the bonds uniting Jesus' parents were known in the Jewish world as early as the first century.
- It is difficult to suppose that the Sages of the Talmud would have used Greek rather than Hebrew terminology.

David Rokeah dates the origin of the name *yeshua ben pantera* to the end of the first century, hand in hand with the emergence of Christian belief in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus. Hence, the invention of this cryptogram would be a Jewish *antithesis* to that belief.<sup>17</sup>

According to Rokeah, the epithet Ben Pantera was already widespread in Jewish society as early as the end of the first century. Rokeah posits a connection between the propagation of biographies of Jesus, including his virginal conception and birth, and the emergence of the Jewish tradition regarding Mary's alleged adultery. This approach reinforces the idea of the Jewish origin of that defamation, which was later transmitted to the Pagan world.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Rokeah maintains that during the Yab-

15. M. GOLDSTEIN, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, New York, MacMillan, 1950, p. 35-36, shows that certain letters have a similar sound in Greek and Hebrew. This is the case, for example, with *p* and *resh* and also *v* and *nun*. Hence it is difficult to presume that there could have been a transliteration of the two words, seeing that the *p* and the *v* were omitted in the Hebrew term, *pantera*.

16. Cf. J.Z. LAUTERBACH, *Rabbinical Essays*, p. 535-536.

17. Cf. D. ROKEAH, "Ben Stara' is 'Ben Pantera'. Towards the Clarification of a Philological Historical Problem," *Tarbiz*, 39 (1970), p. 14 (Heb). We should point out here that some scholars have held that *ben pantera* is a post-medieval Jewish insertion, which does not seem likely, since it is known that his name appears in ancient Christian and Pagan sources. On this thesis, see M. FRIEDLÄNDER, *Der Antichrist in der Vorchristlichen Jüdischen Quellen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1901, p. 48, and, following it, J. MAIER, *Jesus von Nazareth in der Talmudischen Überlieferung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, p. 176-182 ; 190.

18. Cf. D. ROKEAH, "Ben Stara' is 'Ben Pantera'," p. 14-15 ; S.G. WILSON, *Related Strangers. Jews and Christians 70-170 C.E.*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 188, suggests that the formula "ben Pantera" was a kind of cryptogram in Tannaitic literature, but that it became more intelligible in later Talmudic texts. This thesis has not, however, been approved unanimously. H. STRACK and P. BILLERBECK, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Munich, Beck Verlag, 1922-1928, t. I, p. 538,

neh Period, the patronymic Ben Pantera was already used to mock Christian belief in Jesus' virginal conception and birth.<sup>19</sup>

G.G. Porton concludes that the name *yeshua ben pantera* is a corrupt form of *yehoshua ben Perahiah*. However, the only detail that he offers to support his contention is that Yehoshua ben Perahiah, like Jesus, is known in Talmudic sources as a magician.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is difficult, taking note of other occurrences of this name, to accept G.G. Porton's thesis.<sup>21</sup>

According to Peter Schäfer, the close similarity between the words in the Talmud and those of Celsus (as attested by Origen) regarding the name Pantera suggests a common source. Moreover, his argument, which consists in reading the Talmudic polemic and that of Celsus regarding Mary's adultery and the illegitimate birth of Jesus as a counter-narrative to the Evangelists, is entirely pertinent.<sup>22</sup>

In his analysis of the first chapters of Matthew and Luke, Schäfer states judiciously :

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 had indeed been unfaithful to him. He should have dismissed her immediately as was customary according to Jewish law.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Schäfer regards this accusation of adultery as a challenge to belief in the virginal conception, as a challenge to his status as the Messiah descended from David, a position that one can only accept without reservation.

So we have found that the meaning of the cryptogram, *yeshu(a) ben pantera*, is far from being obvious. It probably changed over time according to the Jewish perception of Jesus. Moreover, the epithet also became well known among Christians and pagans.

It may well be that in an early period the name was first an oral tradition and that it was later transcribed, in its different forms, first in ancient writings such as the Tosefta and following that in other texts.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps indeed the name "Ben Pantera"

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claim that the epithet Ben Pantera had no pejorative connotation in the Jewish milieu, and the Jews ultimately accepted it because of the influence of Celsus at the end of the second century.

19. Nevertheless it must be stated that knowledge of this Christian belief among the Jews in such an early period has not been attested with certainty. Since this scholar has based his argument on this sole element, it seems baseless to me. On this matter see E.L. ABEL, "The Virgin Birth," *Revue des études juives*, 128 (1969), p. 395-396.

20. Cf. G.G. PORTON, *The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael*, Leiden, Brill, 1976, t. I, p. 172. On Yehoshua ben Perahiah and his magical practices, see J. NEUSNER, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, Leiden, Brill, 1970, t. V, p. 225-241.

21. This is also the opinion of L.H. SCHIFFMAN, *Who was a Jew ? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism*, Hoboken, Ktav, p. 100, n. 5.

22. Cf. P. SCHÄFER, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 20-21.

23. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22.

24. Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1990, p. 119.

first originated among the Jews and then spread among the pagans, which gave rise to the acerbic reactions of Christian writers.

In view of the difficulty of determining the exact meaning of the cryptogram *ye-shu(a) ben pantera*, some scholars have opted for taking it as a simple name, with no pejorative connotation.<sup>25</sup>

## II. CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Interestingly, vestiges of the formula “Ben Pantera” can be found in patristic literature. In his commentary on John 20:14, Origen reports a tradition, according to which Jesus was illegitimate, which he imputes to the Jews.<sup>26</sup> Origen mentions the accusation of adultery leveled against Mary around the year 248. In his polemic work, *Contra Celsum* I, 32, he attributes the following words to the pagan philosopher (c. 178 CE) :

But let us now return to where the Jew is introduced, speaking of the mother of Jesus, and saying that “when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera ;”<sup>27</sup> (στρατιώτου Πανθήρα τοῦνομα) and let us see whether those who have blindly concocted these fables about the adultery of the Virgin with Panthera, and her rejection by the carpenter, did not invent these stories to overturn His miraculous conception by the Holy Ghost.<sup>28</sup>

This passage permits us to assume that the defamation attributed to Celsus regarding Jesus’ mother predated the second century. However, this injurious remark regarding the virgin birth of Jesus does not appear to be of pagan origin. Rather it is Jewish in origin and was probably widespread a few decades before Celsus made use of it.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Origen explicitly mentions the Jewish origin of Celsus’ remark.<sup>30</sup>

25. Cf. J.Z. LAUTERBACH, *Rabbinical Essays*, p. 536 ; M. GOLDSTEIN, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, p. 39. It should be mentioned that R.T. HERFORD, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1903, p. 40, argued that this name was an ancient expression of mockery that emerged among the Jews in reference to Jesus, but that the meaning was lost.

26. Cf. ORIGEN, Commentary on John 20:14 (*Patrologiae Graecae*, XIV, 608c) : Ἡμεῖς μᾶλλον ἕνα πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Θεὸν, ἢ περὶ σοῦ, ὃ φάσκων μὲν ἐκ παρθένου γεγενῆσθαι, ἐκ πορνείας δὲ γεγεννημένον.

27. The Paris manuscript contains the form “Pantheros.”

28. ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum* I:32 (“Sources Chrétiennes”, 132, trans. M. Borret, I, p. 162-163). It should be noted that other passages in *Contra Celsum* mention similar remarks. See, for example, I:28 (*ibid.*, p. 151-153) and I:69 (*ibid.*, p. 269-271) where Panthera is referred to as the man who allegedly “corrupted the Virgin.”

29. Cf. *Kallah* 18b (ed. Venice 1528, 41c) ; *Sabbath* 104b ; *Sanhedrin* 67a. These texts refer to Jesus’ illegitimate birth. Although they are late, they appear to reflect an ancient tradition, which is attested in the mention of Pantera as Mary’s lover and Jesus’ progenitor, according to M. Lods, “Étude sur les sources juives de la polémique de Celse contre les chrétiens,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, 21 (1941), p. 5-8. The claim that Jesus’ father was pagan is very ancient among the Jews, because it is intended to refute the claim of his descent from David in Matt. 1:19-23.

30. For an opposing opinion, cf. M. GOLDSTEIN, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, p. 36-37, who demonstrates Celsus’ hostility toward both Christianity and Judaism and concludes that it was easy for him to create a fictional Jewish character in order to criticize Christianity as an unworthy religion. Moreover, Goldstein expresses reservations regarding the reliability of Origen’s account.



The tradition of Jesus' mother's adultery is also found in certain Christian apocrypha, showing that the accusation emerged around the beginning of the second century. It may be supposed that its mention in Christian texts is a consequence of its wide dissemination. It goes without saying that these texts deny the accusation. However, the fact that they mention them shows the tenacity and perseverance of these accusations.

Seen in this light, one finds in the Gospel of Thomas 105 : "Jesus said : He who shall know father and mother shall be called the son of a harlot."<sup>31</sup> A similar reference is found in the Acts of Pilate II:3 :

The elders of the Jews answered and said unto Jesus : What shall we see ? Firstly, that thou wast born of fornication ; secondly, that thy birth in Bethlehem was the cause of the slaying of children ; thirdly, that thy father Joseph and thy mother Mary fled into Egypt because they had no confidence before the people.<sup>32</sup>

These sources lead one to conjecture that the insulting accusation of Mary's adultery was widespread among the Jews, and that it was probably transmitted to the pagans and finally found its way into the Christian apocrypha. Hence it is probably quite a longstanding tradition.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that Celsus' tract was contemporaneous with the appearance of the Christian apocrypha exalting Mary's virginity. As an example one could cite the *Protevangelium of James* 11:2-3 that refers to the conception of Jesus "by the Word".<sup>34</sup> Another very interesting mention appears also in the *Ascension of Isaiah* 11:5 which indicates that Joseph did not send Mary away after he found her to be with child and kept her as a "holy virgin, though with child". The passage goes on to present Jesus' birth as miraculous : Joseph and Mary were alone when Mary discovered with astonishment a "small babe". And after she had been astonished, her womb was found as before she had conceived.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the following passage can be cited from the *Odes of Solomon* 19:6, referring to a virgin who gives birth to a child. This virgin becomes a mother and is found filled with tenderness bringing into the world this child while suffering no birth pains.<sup>36</sup>

31. Cf. F. BOVON, P. GEOLTRAIN, ed., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade"), 1997, t. I, p. 152.

32. Cf. P. GEOLTRAIN, J.D. KAESTLI, ed., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade"), 2005, t. II, p. 264-265.

33. Most probably, the accusation of adultery was facilitated by an anachronism, which identified Mary, the mother of Jesus, with Miriam bat Bilgah, the daughter of a priest who renounced Judaism to marry a soldier from the Seleucid army. On this, see T *Sucuh* IV, 28 (ed. M.S. Zuckermann, p. 200) according to MS Vienna ; TB *Sucuh* 56b ; PT *Sucuh* V, 7, 55d.

34. See *Protevangelium of James*, 11, 2 (trans. A. Frey), in F. BOVON, P. GEOLTRAIN, ed., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, t. I, p. 92. This announcement to Mary of the conception by the Word is also found in *Gospel of Bartholomew* 2:20 which also dates back to the second century.

35. See *Ascension of Isaiah*, 11, 5-17 (trans. E. Norelli), in F. BOVON, P. GEOLTRAIN, ed., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, t. I, p. 541-542.

36. See *Odes of Solomon* (trans. M.-J. Pierre), in F. BOVON, P. GEOLTRAIN, ed., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, t. I, p. 709-710.

These passages clearly show the intention of their authors. They wished to demonstrate, even exalt Mary's virginity. The fact that they were contemporary with Celsus' remarks may lead us to see in them a kind of Christian response to the pagan philosopher's attacks. If this assumption is retained, we would be in presence of two types of defense established in the Christian world in the fight against the pagan and Jewish slanders concerning the *virgin birth* of Jesus :

- Taking up the reconsidered accusation of adultery in order to counterattack the authors of this accusation.
- The exaltation of Mary's virginity in the second century apocryphal texts in order to contest Celsus and his disciples.<sup>37</sup>

Most interestingly, the name Pantera appears in Epiphanius in *Adversus Haereses* III, 78, 7, where he quotes Origen regarding Jacob, the father of Joseph and Jesus' grandfather. In that passage Jacob is given the name of Πάνθηρ.<sup>38</sup> In his analysis of this text, Lauterbach cites the Talmudic dictum, according to which grandchildren are like children (Yebamot 62b), concluding that Πάνθηρ became the patronymic applied to Jesus. Hence, according to this scholar, both Jews and Christians would have used the same name for Jesus.<sup>39</sup> In any event, it should be noted that the mention of Πάνθηρ in the passage from Epiphanius shows that in the fourth century, it implied no insult to Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, as Herford emphasizes, it is difficult to state why Jacob, Joseph's father and Jesus' grandfather should have been called Πάνθηρ. Moreover, this instance of its appearance sheds no new light on the origin of the cryptogram *pantera*. Herford suggests that the name *pantera* occasioned the mention of Πάνθηρ and not vice versa.<sup>41</sup>

The accusation was current for a long time among the Jews, for it is found in *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>42</sup> In this work, the structural outline of the biography of Jesus in the Gospels is preserved, while it is reshaped to produce a truncated version of the events. The remarks in the book are based on Talmudic sources that have been thoroughly reworked. *Toledot Yeshu* is thus given over to a thorough revision of the stories in the

37. See J. SCHABERG, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus. A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, p. 188-194 ; 252-254.

38. Cf. EPIPHANIUS, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 78, 7 (*Patrologiae Graecae*, XLII, 708-709).

39. Cf. J.Z. LAUTERBACH, *Rabbinical Essays*, p. 536-537.

40. Cf. R. SEEBERG, "Die Herkunft der Mutter Jesu," in *Theologische Festschrift für G.N. Bonwetsch*, Leipzig, Deichert, 1918, p. 13-14. Moreover, this is corroborated by other uses of the name Πάνθηρ as a common ancestor of both Mary and Joseph in certain patristic sources. See, for example, ANDREAS OF CRETE, *Oratio in Circumcisionem Domini* (*Patrologiae Graecae*, XCVII, 916) ; JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, IV, 15 (*Patrologiae Graecae*, XCIV, 1156-1157) ; EPIPHANIUS, *De Vita Mariae* (*Patrologiae Graecae*, CXX, 190).

41. Cf. R.T. HERFORD, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, London, Williams & Norgate, 1903, p. 39, n. 2. It should be noted that J. EFRON, *Formation of the Primary Christian Church*, Tel-Aviv, hakibbutz hameuchad, 2006, p. 210 (Heb.) rejects this source.

42. For a presentation of this work and its date, see Y. DEUTCH, "New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toldot Yeshu*," *Tarbiz*, 69 (2000), p. 177-197 (Heb.).

Gospels, presenting it in the form of a *Jewish* life of Jesus.<sup>43</sup> Hence we must take the information contained in this polemic work as *representative*. The illegitimate birth of Jesus is rewritten according to various versions of the name of Mary's lover and Jesus' father. The Vienna manuscript, entitled, "History of the Mother and her Son," recounts the only version in which Mary's husband is named Joseph Ben Pandera, whereas the impious man who instigated the adultery is named Yohanan.<sup>44</sup> In the Strasburg manuscripts, the Wagenseil and Huldreich versions of *Toledot Yeshu*, the names are inverted: Jesus' mother's husband is named Yohanan, and the adulterous partner is named Joseph Pandera (or Joseph ben Pandera in the Strasburg manuscript).<sup>45</sup> Most likely, the association of the name Joseph with Pandera is a combination of the evangelical tradition, where Jesus is the son of Joseph, and the Jewish tradition, where he is the son of Pantera.<sup>46</sup>

Here it should be emphasized that the mention "Jesus son of Joseph" in the Gospels appears in this form only in Luke (4:22) and John (1:45; 6:42), in other words, only in the later Gospels. In John (1:45), this expression is employed at the time of the meeting between Philip and Nathanael and the object is to make the person of Jesus more intelligible to Nathanael. It can be supposed that if the author of the Fourth Gospel had been acquainted with the idea of the virgin birth of Jesus, he would have used the expression "Jesus son of Joseph" with the addition of some reservation. Philip's messianic announcement to Nathanael is thus part of the idea of a natural family origin.<sup>47</sup> In John 6:42, the verse specifies: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" It thus offers a supplementary element referring explicitly to Jesus' parents, who moreover seemed to be known by the speakers. Therefore it can be emphasized that no arguments are employed to counter the affirmation of a natural birth of Jesus.<sup>48</sup> This ignorance in John's community of the virginal birth

43. In his pioneering work on *Toledot Yeshu*, S. KRAUSS, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*, Berlin, S. Calvary, 1902, p. 246-247, dates it to the fifth century, whereas W. HORBURY, *A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Yeshu* (Dissertation), Cambridge, 1971, p. 36, argues that it was written in the fourth century. H.J. SCHONFELD, *The Gospel According to the Hebrews*, London, Duckworth, 1937, states that the earliest versions of *Toledot Yeshu* date to the fourth century and that it is a parody of the lost *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which contained precise information about the biography of Jesus. Finally, we should note that it is generally held that this work was written in the tenth century, but that it is based on Talmudic traditions from the Amoraic period. This is the thesis supported by S.T. LACHS, "A 'Jesus Passage' in the Talmud re-examined," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 59 (1969), p. 247.

44. Cf. J.P. OSIER, *L'Évangile du ghetto ou comment les juifs se racontaient Jésus*, Paris, Berg International, 1984, p. 33-65.

45. Cf. *ibid.*, respectively p. 69-83; 87-102; 105-120.

46. Cf. M. LODS, "Étude sur les sources juives de la polémique de Celse contre les chrétiens," p. 7, n. 13, who writes: "In the tradition of the gospels, Joseph is a pious Jew, betrothed to Mary. He takes care of her during her pregnancy, adopts the son upon its birth, and flees to Egypt with her. Thus, because Jesus is a bastard, Joseph plays the role first of lover then of husband, who, to save his own dignity, could neither divorce his wife nor abandon her."

47. See J.-M. MOSCHETTA, *Jésus fils de Joseph. Comment comprendre aujourd'hui la conception virginale de Jésus*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 131.

48. Let us note that in Codex Sinaiticus, in the Freer Codex, the Codex Vaticanus and the Curetonianus, the verse omits « his mother ». See E. HAENCHEN, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (trans. R.W. Funk, ed. R.W. Funk and U. Busse), Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980, p. 292, who notes: "However, the birth of Jesus from a virgin was not 'an article of faith' for the Evangelist. He assumes, rather, that Jesus as true

of Jesus is particularly surprising, in view of the fact, for instance, that two decades later Ignatius of Antioch considered it essential for his faith.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, the accusations of adultery and illegitimate birth that were formulated among the Jews are not an independent tradition but resulted from a Jewish reaction to the Christian belief in Jesus' virginal conception and birth. Therefore, one may assume that this tradition could have emerged as early as the second century. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that the tradition preceded the composition of the Gospel according to Matthew.<sup>50</sup>

### III. A NEW PROPOSAL

The name, "Son of Pantera," must be understood solely as a Jewish *representation* of Christianity as early as the second century, the time of Celsus' remarks. It was probably a common and widespread term of mockery among the Jews, meant to express derision of the belief in Jesus' virginal conception and birth. This defamatory epithet is also found in the writings of Tertullian in second century. He refers to the Jewish arguments against Jesus in the following manner :

This, I shall say, this is that carpenter's or prostitute's son, that Sabbath-breaker, that Samaritan and devil-possessed ! This is He whom you purchased from Judas ! This is He whom you struck with reed and fist, whom you contemptuously spat upon, to whom you gave gall and vinegar to drink ! This is He whom His disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said He had risen again.<sup>51</sup>

This passage is particularly interesting, because it mentions the Jewish accusation of a union with a prostitute, of which Jesus was the product. This must have been a widespread allegation among the Jews, the very milieu in which Tertullian developed. Moreover, it confirms Origen's remarks in *Contra Celsum*.

The Jewish allegation that Jesus was the son of a prostitute is quite well grounded in the Talmudic tradition. It appears in both the Talmudic and Midrashic corpus and without doubt testifies to a very old Jewish *representation* of the person of Jesus.<sup>52</sup> According to this approach, and to return to the purpose of the present contribution, Jesus is alleged to be the product of an illicit union between Mary and a Roman sol-

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man had earthly father and mother". See finally W. BAUER, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 1925, p. 97.

49. See J. SCHABERG, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus. A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, p. 182-183.

50. See R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, New York, Doubleday, 1977, p. 537.

51. TERTULLIAN, *De spectaculis*, XXX, 6 ("Sources Chrétiennes" 332, trans. M. Turcan, Paris, Cerf, 1986, p. 324-326). The Thelwell translation posted on the Web site prudishly translates "*quaestuariae*" as "hireling."

52. Cf. *Sabbath* 104b with an identification of the child as « Jesus the Nazarene » only in Ms. Vatican 108 ; See also T. MURCIA, "Qui est Ben Stada ?", *Revue des études juives*, 167 (2008), who mistranslates the Talmudic passage in *Sabbath* 104b *ben Stada - ben Pandera hou*, as : "Ben Stada was the son of Ben Pandera". However, this is absolutely not a reference to paternity but rather a matter of ascertaining whether the two men were the same. On this, see P. SCHÄFER, *Jesus in the Talmud*, p. 17 ; *Sanhedrin* 67a ; *Pesiqta Rabati* 21 ; etc.

dier named Pantera. The latter is regarded as the lover of Jesus' mother and his biological father. The accusation that Jesus was the son of a prostitute is elaborated in the Midrash in the form of the affiliation between Jesus and Christianity. In other words, Christianity is equated with the seduction of a prostitute, from whom one must distance oneself radically, as we see in the following passage :<sup>53</sup>

What is the hedge which the Holy Writings made about their words ? Lo, it says, *Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house* (Prov 5, 8).

Remove thy way from her refers to *minuth*. When a man is told, "Go not among the minim and enter not into their midst, lest thou stumble through them" he might retort, "I have confidence in myself that, although I enter into their midst, I shall not stumble through them" (or) perhaps thou mightest say, "I will listen to their talk and then retire". Therefore the verse says, *None that go unto her return, neither do they attain unto the paths of life* (Prov 2, 19).

It is written, *She hath prepared her meat, she hath mingled her wine : she hath also furnished her table* (Prov 9, 2). Such are the wicked (*reshaim*).<sup>54</sup> For when a man enters into their circle, they feed him and give him drink and clothe him and shelter him and give him much money. As soon as he becomes one of them, they each claim their own and take it away from him. And of them it is said, *Till an arrow strike through the liver ; as a bird hasteneth to the snare — and knoweth not that it is at the cost of his life* (Prov 7, 23).

Another interpretation. Remove thy way far from her refers to a harlot. For a man is told, "Walk not in this market place and enter not this lane, for a comely and far-farmed harlot is there". And if he says, I have confidence in myself that, although I go there, I shall not stumble because of her, he is told, although thou hast confidence in thyself, walk not there lest thou stumble through her. For lo, the Sages have said that a man should not get into the habit of passing by a harlot's door, for it is said, *For she hath cast down many wounded ; yea, a mighty host are all her slain* (Prov 7, 26).

This is a crucial text, because it allows us to distinguish the attitude of the Sages toward the Christian *minim* [heretics].<sup>55</sup> In effect we find a clear connection between Christianity and prostitution.<sup>56</sup> This connection is to be understood in the following manner : prostitution represents the archetype of temptation ; similarly, for the Sages Christianity represents the archetype of temptation. That temptation is regarded as

53. Cf. *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 2/a (ed. S. Schechter, p. 13-14).

54. In some manuscripts one finds the expression, "*minim reshaim*" [evil heretics]. On this see *ibid.*, p. 14, n. 76.

55. For the history of research regarding the Tannaitic aspect of *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, see M. KISTER, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan. Text, Redaction and Interpretation*, Jerusalem, Yad Izhak ben-Zvi Press, 1998, p. 5-9 (Heb.). The dating of this passage to the Tannaitic period can be confirmed by the parallel version of *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 3/b (ed. S. Schechter, p. 13) in the name of R. Yeoshua ben Korha (a Tanna of the fourth generation) : "This is the voice borrowed by *minuth*. We tell someone not to frequent the *minim*, not to listen to their words, so as not to sin by their acts. If he says, 'I am sure that if I go, and if I do not hear their words, I will not sin by their acts.' We say to him : Even though you are sure, do not go there, because of 'Keep distant from that strange woman, because many are the victims whose fall she has caused.'" This passage seems to be the product of a kind of resignation on the part of the Sages, regarding the misdeeds of Christianity and its attractiveness, although it is of course accompanied by a strong warning.

56. The correlation between heresy and sexual depravity appears in several passages in Talmudic literature. See for example *Qoheleth Rabba* I, 8, where R. Yonathan is confronted by *minim* who engage in sexual practices with a young girl. On these subjects, see the study by B. VISOTZKY, "Overturning the Lamp," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 38 (1987), p. 72-80.

absolutely subversive ; hence there is the injunction to keep one's distance from it, because it is very difficult to resist it.<sup>57</sup>

We must conclude by saying that the epithet "Ben Pantera" is very old and corresponds to a historical period when the Jews wished to *represent* Christianity to themselves by choosing the person of Jesus as an emblematic figure of that religion. At that time, the doctrinal polemics between Jews and Christians caused the two religions to reach a *Parting of the Ways* and to regard one another as rivals.<sup>58</sup> Certainly the emergence of the name Ben Pantera must be situated in this spirit of combat but, above all, of rivalry. It is in this spirit of polemic, which appeared in the second century, that the Parting of the Ways should be placed. This phenomenon of separation between Jews and Judeo-Christians can be explained by a dual process that had its origin both in the rabbinical world and the Christian world, while being a function of different historical factors. The Jewish world, that was well on its way to socio-religious normalization after the destruction of the Second Temple, wished to expel the Judeo-Christians from the Synagogue. The *Birkat ha-minim* constitutes the most significant step in this direction.<sup>59</sup> In the Christian world, the second century was the time of the great Dialogues and disputes with the Jews, including the *Dialogue between Jason and Papiscos* on Jesus, unfortunately lost, the *Dialogue with Tryphon* of Justin of Neapolis or Tertullian's *Adversus Iudaeos*. In the Christian world this century represented the concern for construction of an identity passing frequently by self-definition (in order to dispute internally with personalities such as Basilides or

57. It must be emphasized that from the point of view of *realia historica*, (Judeo-)Christianity certainly must have been very attractive to the Jews. Without difficulty one can imagine that the people were in constant contact with (Judeo-)Christians during the first two centuries of the Christian era, and, being far from the Talmudic centers and the intellectual life of the Sages, they must have been subject to the *temptation* of Christianity in very decided fashion. See the important philological remarks of L. FINKELSTEIN, *Mabo le-Massektot Abot ve-Abot d'Rabbi Natan*, New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950, p. 128-130 (Heb.), where he presents the manuscript versions of this passage and concludes that it refers to the Christians. Finkelstein stresses that certain elements of this midrash refer to historical reality, notably to the fact that the *minim* provided food, drink and clothing to those who joined their assemblies. One could pursue this scholar's train of thought and regard the "missionary" activity of the early Christians, as it is described in this passage, as actions related sociologically to the modern characteristics of this sect and of the neophyte who discovers its attractions. This phenomenon is in fact expressed enigmatically : "As soon as he becomes one of them, they each claim their own and take it away from him," which appears to refer to the distribution of material goods, but, allegorically, it can be understood as : "When one becomes one of them, everyone identifies his given part [of the teachings] and takes hold of it [of its personality] as it is said : 'Till an arrow strike through the liver ; as a bird hasteneth to the snare — and knoweth not that it is at the cost of his life (Prov 7, 23).'" Finally let us note that the analogy between prostitution and idolatry already appears in the Bible, for example in Jer. 2:20, 3:6 ; Ez. 20:30. In this sense one can assume there was a conceptual movement from the biblical representations to those of the Talmud.

58. See S.C. MIMOUNI, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien. Essais historiques*, Paris, Cerf, 1998, p. 475-490 and ID., "Pour une histoire de la séparation entre les communautés 'chrétiennes' et les communautés 'pharisiennes' (ca. 70-135 de notre ère)", *Henoch* 26 (2004), p. 143-171.

59. See D. JAFFÉ, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme. Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique*, Paris, Cerf, 2005, p. 117-335 ; ID., *Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme. Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature talmudique*, Paris, Cerf, 2007, p. 121-135 ; ID., "La reconstitution de la société juive après 70. Normativité et déviance : le cas des judéo-chrétiens et des *amei-ha-aretz*", in J.-M. CHOURAQUI, G. DORIVAL, C. ZYTNIICKI, ed., *Enjeux d'histoire, jeux de mémoire. Les usages du passé juif*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2006, p. 263-274.

Marcion) and apologetic steps aimed at informing the Roman authorities of the existence and reality of Christianity.<sup>60</sup>

The idea of a separation between Jews and Christians in the second century has long been taken for granted by the historiographical research. It was considered that this century launched a period of relative isolation between Jews and Christians and that the only possible interactions involved polemics and conflict. In the last few years, this paradigm has been re-evaluated and Judaism and Christianity are no longer considered monolithic entities for which an act of separation would have marked a historic rupture. The geographic and cultural variations are taken into greater consideration as well as the historical evolutions of the groups such as the “Jewish Christians” and “Judaizers” that so strained to establish dichotomously a definitive separation. This new historiographical approach dwells on the continuity between the traditions shared by Judaism and Christianity and on their mutual impacts. Certainly mutations arose, but an important place is accorded to the constants between the traditions.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, Ben Pantera is the most ancient reference to Jesus to be found in Talmudic literature.<sup>62</sup>

### EXCURSUS : YESHU BEN PANTIRI

The name *yeshua ben pantiri* is equivalent to *yeshu hanotsri* (Jesus of Nazareth). While these names are typical of rabbinical literature, it should be noted that the latter

60. See the collective work edited by N. BELAYCHE and S.C. MIMOUNI, *Entre lignes de partage et territoires de passage. Les identités religieuses dans les mondes grec et romain. “Paganismes”, “judaïsmes”, “christianismes”*, Paris, Louvain, Peeters, 2009 and in particular the articles of S.C. MIMOUNI, A. LE BOULLUEC, and D. MARGUERAT.

61. See in this respect the collective work edited by A. YOSHIKO REED and A.H. BECKER, *The Ways that Never Parted*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2003 ; D. BOYARIN, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004 and ID., “Rethinking Jewish Christianity : an Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category (to which is Appended a Correction of my ‘Boder Lines’)” , *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 99 (2009), p. 7-36. See also at last analysis on the relations between Judaism and Christianity and the history of the Jewish Christians, the works of M. JACKSON-MCCABE, ed., *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007 ; O. SKARSAUNE, R. HVALVIK, ed., *Jewish Believers in Jesus : The Early Centuries*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 2007 ; J. CARLETON PAGET, *Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2010 ; E.K. BROADHEAD, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus. Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2010. For a different historiographical approach see Y.Y. TEPLER, *Birkat ha-Minim. Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2007.

62. It is quite interesting to point out that in his *Pugio fidei*, Raymond Martin transcribes the passage from PT Sabbath XIV, 4, 14d-15a as *ex nomine Jesu Panterini* [quoted by S. LIEBERMAN, “Notes on the First Chapter of Qoheleth Rabba,” in E.E. URBACH, J.Z. WERBLOWSKY, C. WIRSZUBSKI, ed., *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1967, p. 172-173 (Heb.)].

is mainly found in Babylonian sources.<sup>63</sup> Although relatively few in number, these passages are very explicit in their reference to Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

It should be noted that the form *yeshua ben Pantiri* occurs nowhere else in the Talmud except in Tosefta *Hulin* II, 24. Hence, the name is usually thought to be a deformation of the form, *yeshua ben pant(d)era*, which is supposed to be its original version. Nevertheless, M.S. Rens claims to have uncovered a mention of Jesus in the name Yeshua ben Pantiri, which appears in the Baraita of Baba Metsia 62a :

Two people were traveling along the way and one of them had in his possession a flask of water. If both drink, they will die, however, if one of them drinks, he will reach a settlement. Ben Patura preached : “It is better that both should drink and die than one should witness the death of this fellow.” Until R. Aqiba came and taught : “*That your brother may live with you. Your life takes precedence over your fellow’s life.*”

According to Rens, the unusual use of the verbal form *darash* without any scriptural support reveals a teaching by an anonymous author who does not belong to the circles close to the Sages. In the present case, this author, who is thus *ben Patura*, is assimilated to *yeshua ben pantiri*, meaning Jesus. Rens thus suggests correcting the text, basing himself on a transliteration of the Hebrew *ben pantiri* into the Latin *ben Patri (filius patri)*, evoking the filial nature of Jesus, as it seems to appear in the Gospels.<sup>65</sup>

Regarding the teaching that is supposed to be that of Jesus, Lauterbach does not hesitate to associate it to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, suggesting that it might have been omitted during the composition of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>66</sup> In making this move, this scholar associates the two terms, *darash*, which allegedly introduces the teachings of Jesus, and *drasha*, which means a sermon.<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding, this connection, which, to say the least, is speculative, suffers from several difficulties, which cast doubt upon its veracity :

- Other occurrences of the verb form *darash* are found, and their authors are well known Sages.<sup>68</sup>
- It is unlikely that Jesus would have been named with the Hebrew term *ben* accompanied by the Latin *patri*.

63. See in particular BT *Sanhedrin* 43a ; 107b ; BT *Sotah* 47a regarding the period of the Tannaim and BT *Sanhedrin* 103a ; BT *Berakhot* 17b regarding the period of the Amoraim. It should be recalled that since these texts were subject to Christian censorship, manuscript sources must be consulted.

64. For a detailed analysis of these implicit and explicit Talmudic texts relating to Jesus, one should consider the older but still interesting work of R.T. HERFORD, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, p. 35-95 and H. STRACK, *Jesus, die Häretiker und die Christen nach den Ältesten Jüdischen Angaben*, Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1910, p. 18-46. For an analysis, consult my studies : D. JAFFÉ, “Jésus dans le Talmud : le texte sur Josué Ben Parahyah et son disciple Jésus réexaminé,” in S. TRIGANO, ed., *Le christianisme au miroir du judaïsme*, Pardès, 35 (2003), p. 79-92 and D. JAFFÉ, *Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme. Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature talmudique*, p. 137-151.

65. See, for example, Matt. 15:13.

66. Matt. 5:39-40.

67. See J.Z. LAUTERBACH, “Jesus in the Talmud,” in *Rabbinical Essays*, p. 537-539.

68. Among others, see BT *Gittin* 43a ; BT *Pesahim* 42a ; and *Ketubbot* 49a.



- A text of the Sifra, with content almost identical to that of the Baraita, mentions R. Aquiba in conversation with ben Patouri(a). Needless to say, this contemporary reference completely undermines the identification of the latter with Jesus.<sup>69</sup>
- Certain texts of the Tosefta mention the complete name of Ben Patouri(a), who appears to be *R. Yehuda ben Paturi*, a man who indeed lived in the second century.<sup>70</sup>

Thus it is difficult to connect these two personages to one another. Nevertheless, it does seem logical to assume that *yeshua ben pantiri* is a deformation of *yeshua ben pantera*, which was much better known in Talmudic texts as references to Jesus.

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69. Sifra *Behar Sinai*, V.

70. See T Sotah V, 13 ; VI, 1 (ed. Zuckermann, p. 303) according to MS Vienna.