

Some Considerations on the History of the Talmud and Christianity and a Proposition of a New Method

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A. The Shared Image of the Past Today

1.

I would like to start by thanking Daniel, Holger and Michal for organizing the conference. In the invitation you sent us you wrote: “This conference will enable a ‘returning of the gaze’, illuminating important new elements of Jewish/Christian relations as well as of classical rabbinic Judaism itself. Its goal is to work towards a new understanding of how to read rabbinic Judaism in light of the Christian elements of the rabbis’ Palestinian and Sasanian context, and we would be delighted if you were able to participate.” It is an ambitious project and I am thrilled to take part in it.

The promise of a new movement is announced already in the title of the conference – *The Talmud and Christianity. Rabbinic Judaism after Constantine*. It takes a stand on several ongoing debates in our scholarship and opens the way for new ones.

First, it serves as a methodological and epistemological reminder: no matter how we define rabbinic Judaism (as a religious, spiritual, legal, etc. movement), our knowledge of it is still largely organized according to the talmudic order of discourse. It is an obvious point, but worth stressing, especially in the context of a conference that is supposed to produce a historical knowledge, following thus another order of discourse - of modern historiography, considerably different than the talmudic one.

The title also seems to suggest that the category of Christianity is relevant to the study of rabbinic Judaism particularly after Constantine. Another reminder then: in order to examine the relationships between the two entities (rabbinic Judaism and Christianity) we have to take into account the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and more generally the imperial context of the spread of Christianity in the Greco-Roman and Sasanian worlds. Again, an obvious point, but in our age of hyper specialization, bringing together experts of so many different domains is a complicated task and not only logistically.

In order to prepare my contribution, I decided to turn back to an article I wrote two years ago (some of the participants might remember a presentation of the work in progress), about two “Jesus stories” from the Bavli: the first one is about the encounter between Rabbi Eliezer and a disciple of Jesus (Avodah Zarah 17a), and the second deals with the flight to Alexandria of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahiah and his disciple, Jesus (Sanhedrin 107b and Sotah 47a). The stories are based on Palestinian rabbinic sources that we can find in the Tosefta and the Yerushalmi.

My intention in that article was to study the Talmudic contribution to what Annette Yoshiko Reed called the “shared image of the past” of both Jews and Christians. In her article, “When did Rabbis Become Pharisees? Reflections on Christian Evidence for post-70 Judaism” (2013), Reed describes how the association of Rabbis with New Testament Pharisees took form in late antique Christian literature. The Bavli’s Jesus stories seem to convey a similar image: they present Jesus as a proto-rabbinic figure. This is a fascinating fact. Explicit references to late antique Christian texts are practically inexistent in Talmudic literature, and yet, both corpora seem to convey the same image in which Pharisees and Rabbis are mixed together, with Jesus rebelling his way out of them. It is a rare example of a Talmudic-Christian “collaboration” that transgresses the borders of different political, cultural, religious and textual worlds.

How did the fabrication of the shared image occur? Who were its agents? What were their motives and intentions?

In her article, Reed gave the Christian part of the answer. In my article I dealt with the Talmudic one. I analyzed the differences between the Palestinian and Babylonian versions, and proposed to read the stories as the expression of a particular concern of late antique Babylonian rabbis, a philological-historical question that can be summarized as follows: why are Jesus and his teachings never quoted in tannaitic literature?

A strange question, no doubt. But it looks more relevant from the point of view of a Babylonian rabbi who happened to have some knowledge of the Gospels, and might have even read them – if not in Greek than in Aramaic. The few references to the Gospels from the Bavli lead us to believe that such rabbis existed. My hypothesis was that for some of these rabbis, the Gospels functioned as a source of knowledge of their own movement, and that they read them also in order to understand their own past. I planted the following line of thought in their head: “There is a text, which tells the story of a rabbi in Galilee and Judea during the last years of the Second Temple; the discourse of this rabbi is sometime as interesting as that of our rabbis. Why, then, did our rabbis exclude Jesus, and the only time they mentioned a teaching of him it was silenced?”

All this is of course very hypothetical, and in the article I tried to defend the hypothesis in the traditional ways of our scholarship. You can look at the summary that I joined to this paper, or send me an email for the full version.

When I read the article now, I realize that I missed something essential. I did not justify the right that I claim to myself: to plant this question in the head of other people, to have access to their minds. I felt the need to do so already when I wrote the article. But something in the order of our discourse inhibited me.

It is, by definition, a personal problem, but I believe it is not only mine. Under the auspices of contemporary historiography, especially of antiquity, it is very difficult to talk about the “empathic connection between the historian and her subjects – a connection made possible by the species similarity between human subjectivities across place and time”.¹ I can give a general justification, as does Barbara Taylor in the quotation above, and argue that every historian has an empathic connection to his or her historical subjects, and therefore has some right to speak in their name. I can also describe it in the more poetic language of Walter Benjamin, as the “secret agreement” between the person I am today and these people of the past. But when I start talking about *my* personnel investment in the texts I study I am silenced. I was trained to believe that “this stuff” did not belong in a scientific attempt to reconstruct the past. It is not universal enough. I should put it aside when I approach the texts and read them objectively with the universal tools of the discipline.²

This method works for me many times. But not now. I am a historian of rabbinic Judaism, who is also a Jew living in Paris. The past is too present; it affects me in ways that cannot be

¹ Barbara Taylor, “Historical Subjectivity” in Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor (ed), *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past* (Palgrave, 2012), 195-210, p. 199.

² Most attempts to introduce the historical subject of the historian back to historiographic discourse are theoretical (developing a new concept of history rather than a new method). They are also made mainly by historians of the modern and contemporary periods. “Ego-Histoire”, a term coined by Pierre Nora in the 1980s, is an interesting example. In the book published in 1987, *Essais d'Ego-Histoire*, Nora invited several historians to explain their work by the help of their autobiography. See also the journal *Histoire* volume 3 (2001) dedicated to Ego-Histoire.

ignored. I will give one example. When I pass near the Notre-Dame cathedral, or when I cross the Ile Saint-Louis, I often think about the burning of the Talmud that took place in Paris in the 13th century. This is not what the magnificent façade of the church, or the beautiful small island named after King Louis IX, are supposed to bring to my mind, and yet they do. Because of who I am, because of where I come from, because of the surroundings of my existence, of what I do and what I know, I am touched by the tragic dimension of the history I study. I am reminded of the historical significance of what I do, the fact that my professional activity, especially when it is practiced here, is a part of the long and complicated history of the Talmud and Christianity after Constantine.

2.

The medieval attempts to juxtapose Christian and Talmudic knowledge of the past were made in a completely different atmosphere than ours. In the medieval context, the project to create or to impose a shared image of the past had serious legal, political and theological implications. But still, the Talmud trial of Paris was a decisive moment in the history of the relation between Talmud and Christianity. As Piero Cappeli writes, “the sources about the Paris trial are the first documents from northern Europe where Jewish criticism against Jesus is based on direct knowledge of the New Testament”.³ In fact, even though Jewish knowledge and critique of the New Testament is attested in earlier sources, it was mostly refuted on its own sake and not compared to the Talmudic relevant passages.

From the Christian side also, the Catholics left the Talmud alone. But during the 13th century, they began to acknowledge the fact that the Jews who lived among them followed a different law than the one of the Old Testament. The new information, that mostly came from Jews who converted to Christianity, had an important political significance – the tolerance towards Jews was justified theologically upon the assumption that they follow the text of the Old Testament and therefore still have the potential to understand the true, i.e. Christological, meaning of the biblical text. The fact that the Lord’s Law was mediated to the Jews by the Talmud, with its fables and myths about God and Jesus, was conceived as a serious obstacle to the conversion of Jews to Christianity.⁴

When in 1239 Pope Gregory IX sent letters across Europe asking bishops and sovereigns to seize and burn all manuscripts of the Talmud, the king of France, Louis IX, responded. A devout catholic as he was, the king decided to bring the Talmud to trial in order to judge whether the accusations were true or not. Opened the Talmud trial of 1240 that ended with a confirmation of the accusations and the confiscation and burning of many talmudic manuscripts.

The Talmud was accused of being an anti-Christian project; “the main reason that keeps the Jews stubborn in their perfidy”.⁵ During the trial, the talmudic references to Jesus were read by the Catholic prosecutors as a proof of their historical and theological claim – that rabbinic Judaism was founded in order to keep the Jews away from Jesus and his teachings

³ Piero Capelli. Review of *The Trial of the Talmud, Paris, 1240*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39555>.

⁴ For recent accounts see: Maurice Kriegel, “Le procès et le brûlement du Talmud. 1239-1248” in Saint Louis et les juifs. Politique et idéologie sous le règne de Louis IX, sous la direction de Paul Salmona et de Juliette Sibon, Paris, Éditions du Patrimoine, 2015, p. 105-112; John Friedman, Jean Connell Hoff, Robert Chazan, *The Trial of the Talmud Paris, 1240*, Toronto, 2012.

⁵ From a letter sent by Pope Gregory IX in June 1239 to the archbishops of France (*The trial of the Talmud*, p. 94).

According to the Hebrew narrative of the trial – The Disputation of Rabbi Yehiel of Paris – written shortly after the event, the Jewish defense against the accusations of blaspheming Jesus revolved around the claim that the Talmud talks about other Jesus’ and not the one who is “the god of the Christians”. Here is an example of the defense of Rabbi Yehiel, the representative of the Jewish side in the trial. He is referring to the story from the Bavli about the flight of Alexandria of the rabbi Yehoshoua ben Perahiah and his disciple Jesus:

“Indeed, the truth is that this [Jesus] was not your deity, for this event took place in the time of Joshua son of Perahiah and the time of King Yannai and Shimon son of Shetah, who was the teacher of Judah ben Taba and of Shemaya and Avtaliyon. Our Rabbi Hillel the elder was the first of the patriarchs, the father of Rabbi Shimon the teacher of Yudan, the teacher of Gamaliel the Elder, as it says in the first chapter of Tractate Shabbat... And Shimon the son of Shetah preceded them by two generations, that is, more than two hundred years, so that Shimon ben Shetah lived almost three hundred years [before the destruction of the second Temple]. And 172 years after the destruction completes the year 4000. Thus, 1472 years later the fifth millennium occurs. Thus, there are 1472 years since this Jesus. But according to the gentile calendar [lit. counting or calculation], the birth of Jesus occurred only 1240 years ago. And thus do they calculate in reckoning by the incarnation. Thus, the one [the Talmud’s Jesus] preceded their Jesus by two hundred years. And theirs took place in the days of Queen Helene, while this one occurred in the days of King Yannai. And the incident in the chapter *Nigmar ha-Din* involved this one [the early Jesus], who was eventually stoned, as indicated in *Nigmar ha-Din*; it was not their god. In the entire Talmud he [the Christian Jesus] is not mentioned”.⁶

According to Rabbi Yehiel, there were several rebels named Jesus, and the Christian is just one of them. He tries to refute the catholic historical-philological claim by relying on talmudic historiography, as it came to him through the Talmud and geonic accounts. But he places this rabbinic knowledge of the past on a chronology familiar to the Christians and accepted by them as universal. This allows him to create a version of the shared image, which is complex enough to contain both the Talmudic Jesus and the Christian one.

The strategy failed, and the Talmud was condemned. Even though its burning might have been mostly a symbolic act, and the other Talmud trials had different scenarios, it still marked the fate of the Talmud in Europe and especially in France for many years. In Catholic France there was place for only one image of the Jewish/Christian past, and only in the second half of the 20th century the Talmud could be considered again as a valuable historical source.

3.

In some way, for the reasons I gave above, I place myself in this *longue durée*, as one of the producers of a shared image of the past that was never really shared. This responsibility cannot be taken lightly. When I read the Talmudic Jesus stories I am reminded of an ethical obligation I have not only to my profession but also to the people whose traces I read, and those who clung to these traces. I want to do them justice when I bring their voice from the past.

It may sound messianic, and the reference to Walter Benjamin is appropriate:

⁶ Translation: John Friedman from *The Trial of the Talmud*, p.138-9.

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (VI).⁷

Naturally, my conception of the mission is not the same as Benjamin’s. I live in a less dark time, in a West that stresses its “Judeo-Christian” heritage. Thanks to the work of many past and present scholars and religious leaders, the dual structure (the redeemer and the Antichrist) is no longer exclusive as it seems to have been in the past. When I try to recover the Talmudic subjects and their relationship to what we call “Christianity”, I do not necessarily think of them as being in “danger”, and when I call myself their “redeemer” it can only be parodic.

The stakes of my mission are not as high, most of the work has already been done. I have behind me many scholars who “imagined a parting of the ways that set Judaism and Christianity on equally broad boulevards of development”.⁸ This is true for the Talmud not only in relation to Christianity. It no longer needs redeemers that will bring it under the protective wings of academic reason. It is there, and it continues to be digested by our discourse, in order to be born again on the vast platform of our objective knowledge of the past.⁹

Today, we can travel more freely in the imagined past, have a deeper understanding of it and of our role and responsibility as agents of its articulation. Indeed, one of the main achievements of post WW2 scholarship about Judaism and Christianity was the creation of a discursive space in which Talmudic and Christian texts can dialogue with each other outside the theological-political constraining frameworks. Juxtaposing a Talmudic story about Jesus with passages from the Gospels is simply not as consequential, or dangerous, as it was before.

What do I do with this freedom? How can I use it in order to create a truly meaningful image of the past, that will reflect the hopes of the people who lived in it? I know that this freedom was not easy to achieve, and if history has taught us something, it may not last forever. I feel, therefore, the obligation to use it in order to develop further our craft as historiographers, making the traces we leave more meaningful, more representative of our particular ways to inscribe the past in the present and of the hopes that guide us in our project.

B. The Method (Work in Progress)

It is out of the scope of this paper (and also somewhat redundant in 2016) to develop a general argument about the political and ideological dimensions of the scientific production of objective truth. Much more urgent than a new “critical” concept of the past and its relation to

⁷ Trans. Harry Zohn in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1968).

⁸ Andrew Jacobs, “Jews and Christians”, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 2011, p. 171.

⁹ The historical process of the “universalization” of Talmudic knowledge is not as simple or linear as may be suggested here. On the status of rabbinic literature in early modern universities see: Carsten Wilke, “Splendeurs et infortunes du talmudisme académique en Allemagne”, in *Les textes judéophobes et judéophiles dans l’Europe chrétienne à l’époque moderne*, PUF, 2000, p. 97-134.

the present is a technique or a method that will enable us to overcome the obstacle and to objectify the subjective investment in the texts. As historians, we all use our imagination in order to connect to the subjects we are studying. We try to understand them as they were by imagining ourselves in their place. These personal analogies may come out orally, in a conversation among scholars or in lectures.¹⁰ But when we try to integrate them in a written discourse we are confronted with the calm but firm voice of the call for objectivity.

In the hope of overcoming this barrier, I would like to use this opportunity to try to develop the first guidelines of a new historiographical method. Even though the method was developed in the context of the study of the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, I believe it may be relevant to historians of other fields that confront similar problems.

My starting point will be the introduction of Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schwartz to their recent edited volume: *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write their History* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). I chose this text for two main reasons. First, unlike many other studies in the field, it shows awareness of the epistemological difficulty we have as historians to reconstruct a shared image of Jews and Christians in antiquity that did not really exist in the minds of either Jews or Christians. Second, as the title of their book shows, Tomson and Schwartz propose a method to deal with the problem and perhaps even to overcome it. They develop a “‘shared history’ paradigm”. While they apply it directly to the two first centuries, it is important enough to be quoted at length here, as it represents a larger tendency in scholarship.

“There is an often overlooked common factor that unites early Jewish and Christian history and that both enables and necessitates studying them simultaneously: the Roman Empire. The period under discussion saw the unfolding of the Empire to its maximum power and its manifold impact on the habitat of ancient Jews and Christians...

“By consequence, as for the sources, our paradigm requires that we read Jewish and Christian sources simultaneously in a framework that is provided by the Roman literary sources.... A well-trying procedure is using rabbinic texts combine with support from reasonably datable literary evidence such as Roman or Christian documents and archaeology....

“Our 'shared history' paradigm implies the assumption that the separation between Judaism and Christianity that materialized during the second century CE was not caused by 'essential' theological differences, such as over the profession of the Messiah or of the divine Word, nor by disputes about the implementation of the Jewish law... Our hypothesis is that indeed there were such issues of dissent, but that they were only converted into being causes for separation in the crucible of political and social forces provoked by the Roman occupation, especially the three Jewish revolts, their merciless repression, and the need for the suppressed to respond to the exigencies of the Roman occupation. These political and social forces, while being obvious, were hitherto not sufficiently brought to bear on the shared early history of Jews and Christians, It is ironic to realize that in drawing

¹⁰ I recall a conversation I had a couple of years ago with an important professor of ancient Judaism about the absence of Jesus from the Mishnah. He immediately dismissed the question by referring to his intellectual context: “I never spoke to the people from the department next door even though I’ve been working beside them for many years.” This analogy (seeing rabbis and Christians as members of two neighboring department in an Anglo-Saxon university) is of course as stimulating as it is problematic, but will probably not find its way to an article.

attention to them, we reflect the basic aim of historiography as this was seen by both Herodotus and Thucydides: was as a most evident factor of change.” (4-5)

Studying early rabbinic literature in the context of the Roman Empire and the Greco-Roman world in general is of course not new. But many studies that appeared in the 1990s and the 2000s on the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity ignored the imperial context or gave it a rather limited place, as one other element in the background of the story. The tendency to ignore the Roman context or to marginalize it was met with a counter movement that sought to bring back Rome to the story, sometime at the expense of Christianity.¹¹ The method proposed by Tomson and Schwartz – to use the imperial framework as the objective platform on which we can study the relationship between Judaism and Christianity – can be viewed as a form of synthesis between the movement to understand rabbinic Judaism on the background of Christianity, and the counter-movement to emphasize instead the imperial context.

What is interesting in their proposal is that the objective framework gets the form of a particular political structure – the Roman Empire. It is an understandable choice, and the authors defend it in the introduction. They call us to write the unitary history of Jews and Christians on an imperial platform whose advantage is not being Jewish nor Christian, but still relevant to both sides of the story and to a large extent (that’s their hypothesis) shaped the parting of the ways and the formation of the two movements.

In fact, many of us use an imperial framework in our conception of “a unitary history of Jews and Christians”, even when we study the relationship between Rabbis and Christians after the two first centuries and outside the Roman Empire. When we try to bring together our different sources in order to reconstruct the past, we have to use some objective framework, whose existence is both independent to the two groups, and acknowledged and recognized by them. The imperial order in the largest sense, i.e. the social, political and economic conditions imposed and objectified by the ruling political force, is a good candidate for the role of the impartial platform, the imagined plateau where we can trace the “equally broad boulevards of development” of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

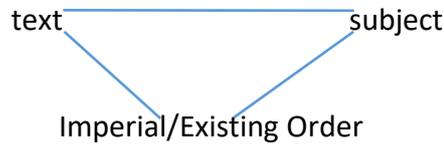
The advantage of Tomson and Schwartz is that they explicitly formulate what many of us do anyway, i.e. falling back on the imperial order as the objective foundation of historical reconstruction. This epistemological tendency seems to be more prevalent among historians of antiquity for several reasons. For lack of sufficient sources, we usually don’t have the luxury of our colleagues who specialize in later periods to do micro-history and are therefore obliged to adopt a macro perspective. The time lapse that separates us from our subjects also pushes us to look on them “downwards”. Finally, our claim for objectivity places us on the same position as an imagined emperor, who tries to encapsulate in his vision the truth about all the different elements that compose his empire.

As historians of antiquity, we cannot get rid of some sort of an “Empire state of mind”, especially when we try to contribute to Jewish/Christian historiography. But as historical subjects, who live in a postcolonial world, the demand to reproduce it blindly is disturbing. We know how much violence can hide beneath the call for universal objectivity, and how easily it can be manipulated. The history of the Talmud and Christianity after Constantine provides us with many concrete examples.

¹¹ Check for example the introduction to Adiel Schremer’s book from 2009 *Brothers Estranged* and the rapid and somewhat aggressive dismissal of Schremer’s thesis by Peter Schäfer in his *The Jewish Jesus* (2012).

The method was developed out of this ambiguity towards the objectivity of the Empire. It uses the historian's subjective position not as an antidote to imperial order but rather as a particular and sensitive point of reference to it. It is a hermeneutical method, aiming at the reconstruction of the intentions and motives that led to the creation of the ancient texts and that shaped their reception.

I propose the following general structure:



The subjects who are behind the text (as authors, redactors, readers, transmitters...) are conceived as free agents in the limits of this structure. Their intentions cannot be fully seized but are always partially determined by the imperial or existing order. Their relation to the existing order is the point of attachment of the historian, since he or she also acts inside a similar structure. Again, I use the adjective imperial in a very large sense, as the objective infrastructure in which the human being is developed and exists as a unique subject. My proposal for the historian is to articulate his or her special coordinates in the imperial order in order to reconstruct a hermeneutical circle that would correspond, hypothetically, to the one of the historical subjects. It can be envisioned as an “overlapping” of two hermeneutical circles: of the reader of the sources and of the subjects behind them.

The articulation of my coordinates in the existing order should be done carefully, since our words are often limited, and our categories do not necessarily have the same meaning they had in antiquity. For example, I cannot justify my interpretation of the talmudic text by relying on my Jewish identity. As we all know too well the category of Judaism was imbricated differently throughout history. If I do want to integrate my Jewishness to my argument (and I'm aware of how provocative this idea might seem), I should understand how it situates me as a human subject – how does it affect my experience of the world and my understanding.

It is important to note that the method was invented retroactively, as a means to justify my otherwise intuitive interpretations. I believe that this is also how it should be used: it is not supposed to limit our hermeneutical freedom as readers (this is done by the texts we read and our historical objective knowledge) but rather to enable us to objectify our presumptions in a language that could be understood and valued by our peers.

To give one example of the method, I will turn to my proposition to read Mathieu 23 (Jesus criticizes his disciples for wanting to be called “rabbi”) from the hypothetical point of view of a Babylonian rabbi (see section *a* of the summary below).

My argument in the article went as follows: since it is reasonable to assume that some rabbis in Babylonia had knowledge of the Gospels, as several Talmudic passages and recent studies suggest, it is possible that the text of Mathieu 23 was read by the rabbis or at least could have been read by them. My *intuition* was that for a Babylonian rabbi, this chapter would be a possible source for studying the history of his “own” movement – the history of the rabbis he recites and studies and the status of the title “rabbi” towards the end of the second temple period. I therefore proposed to read it through his eyes (or in other words, to reconstruct the hermeneutical circle in which he would have read this chapter).

Now, in order to justify my intuition, I articulate my relation to the texts (both rabbinic and Christian) as follows:

I am a historian who specialize in ancient rabbinic Judaism. This is the form of my participation in the existing order (I am being paid for it). In this existing order the status of “my domain” is rather marginal. There are almost no Talmudic scholars in France outside the Jewish establishments of the Yeshivah and the Synagogue, and rabbinic knowledge occupies very little place if any in public intellectual debates. On the other hand, the text of the New Testament still enjoys a more “universal” status in my environment. Even though France is no longer a catholic state and boasts about its *laïcité*, Christianity has left so many visible traces on its culture, architecture, intellectual and even political life.

This particular constellation determines to some extent my relation to Mathieu 23 and to the Gospels in general. Even though they do not belong officially to my particular domain, they contain valuable information for the understanding of the history (or pre-history) of the rabbinic movement in Palestine, especially Mathieu 23, in which we find the first reflection on the social and religious meaning of the title “rabbi”.

A fourth or fifth century Babylonian rabbi, I argue, had a similar structural relation to the two corpora – rabbinic and Christian. His “professional” activity was the study of Palestinian rabbinic traditions, but on the same time he must have acknowledged the marginality of these traditions among Jews and in general. He knew that Jesus’ religion gained many followers throughout the years, and even became the religion of the Roman Empire. The fact that the Christian Holy Scriptures describe Jesus as a rabbi was therefore historically stimulating for him in a way I can understand.

The structural resemblance between my position towards the text and that of the Babylonian rabbi, allows me to reconstruct his hypothetical reading of Mathieu 23. In some sense we share a similar historical-philological project. This is the foundation of the “empathic connection” between us; my license to articulate his motivations and hopes.

It is a small example, perhaps not the best one, for the use of the method. I hope to be able to develop it further, or bring other examples, during our discussions. As you can see, the idea is not to write an autobiographical account but rather to formulate some structural similarities between the historian and the people he or she studies, in order to objectify our “empathic connection” with our subjects. It allows us to deepen our understanding of the past by using our knowledge of ourselves as historical and ethical subjects.

To name this method, I chose the otherwise pejorative term “speculative philology”. I hope some of you will find it useful, and look forward to our discussions in the conference.

