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## The Strange Ending to Sotah

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D, 1995  
 Arrangement and Comments by David Sielaff, September 2016

Read the accompanying [Newsletter for September 2016](#)



### The Strange Ending to Sotah

**EDITOR'S NOTE: I am re-issuing this reformatted and annotated article because I think few of you have ever read it. Why do I say this? It is because I have not received one question about this article since I took over as Director of ASK in January 2002. Material in a section of the Jewish Babylonian Talmud called the Sotah speaks about Jesus. It gives us background of Gospel events from the perspective of Jewish leaders centuries after Christ's crucifixion. Jewish leaders knew considerably more than most people realize, and they preserved their thoughts and opinions for their own future generations. That information is available for all to read and judge today.**

The Jewish religious establishment and the Jewish people put Jesus to death on the tree of crucifixion. Jesus died because of their direct and knowing action. Is there any record that the later Jewish religious establishment was aware of the guilt of their ancestors? Yes there is, but it is hidden in at least one parable within Jewish writings. They question their own role in killing Jesus. That being said, no one has any right to think ourselves more righteous than anyone else. Jesus died for your sins and the sins of Judas, the Jewish leaders, and people. They were chosen to perform that function, just as they are God's chosen people, and destined to teach the world about God because of His special relationship with them, so that in the end, "**All Israel shall be saved**" (Romans 11:26).

Before or after you read the article below, read the information of post-resurrection history in "[Chapter 10: The Solidification of Rabbinic Judaism](#)" in Dr. Martin's book *The People that History Forgot*.<sup>1</sup> In that book you will learn about the Edomite people who changed the racial makeup of southern Europe. You will learn how Gnosticism played a major part to infiltrate paganism into the *ekklesia* of God, corrupting clear biblical teachings. Before and after the Jewish rebellion ending in 70 AD, Judaism went through horrific times. Suddenly they were without a Temple as the center of their society, religion, and government, Jewish (Israelite) people were again dispersed around the known world. Enjoy "The Strange Ending of Sotah."

<sup>1</sup> You can also listen to this book for free through downloadable MP3s of two different people, each reading the entire book. Each reader gives unique renderings of the important information regarding early church history and Jewish history. Listen to the text at your leisure while you do chores or walk. DWS

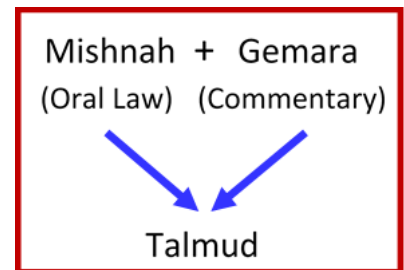
The apostle Paul made it clear that the time was coming when “all Israel shall be saved” (Romans 11:26). And “all Israel” will indeed hear the Gospel and accept it. In a section of an early Jewish work called Sotah (a part of the Talmud) we find an interesting account, hidden in cryptic language, about the significance of Jesus and how the Sanhedrin of the Jews sentenced Jesus to death in an unjust manner. These early Jews also show (recorded in Sotah) that from the very time Jesus was crucified, the fortunes of the Jewish people went from bad to worse.<sup>2</sup>

However, a change of direction has started for the Jewish people, as the Sotah showed would occur. It began with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Soon, the people of Israel will begin to thrive as never before when a second “Elijah” appears with a message of repentance.<sup>3</sup> The account is revealed in “The Strange Ending to Sotah.”

The book called Sotah is a part of the Jewish Talmud which was completed in written form in the middle part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. There are two parts to the Talmud.

The **first** part is an early section called the Mishnah which was compiled from oral traditions remembered by Jewish religious leaders after the war that destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD. Many of these leaders were from Babylon. About 200 AD, a later generation of the Jewish religious court, still called the Sanhedrin, thought it necessary to write down those oral traditions.

Therefore, the Mishnah contains the written teachings of the Oral Law of the Jews gathered by the Jewish authorities (mostly Pharisees) from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>4</sup> The word *Mishnah* means “further teaching or repetition” and it was intended to provide additional teachings to the Law of Moses while still retaining Mosaic Law as its basis of doctrine. In a word, the Mishnah contains laws and regulations based on the Law of Moses with many additional laws adopted by the Jewish authorities that Moses did not specifically cover in detail.



**Second**, there were later commentaries on the information in the Mishnah written from 200 AD to about 450 AD. These are called *Gemaras*. The combination of the original Mishnah with the Gemaras give us what is called the Talmud today. *Talmud* means “teaching, instruction.” There are two complete Talmuds. One is the Jerusalem Talmud, which is shorter. The other is the Babylonian Talmud which is longer. The names come from the two areas where most of the rabbis (who gave the Gemara commentaries) lived, the Jerusalem area or the Babylonian area.

### What Is the Work Called Sotah?

The literature called Sotah is actually a chapter (called a Tractate) of the Mishnah. It is one of 63 Tractates arranged in Six Divisions.<sup>5</sup> Sotah is the fifth Tractate of the Third Division called Nashim (“Women”) which

<sup>2</sup> They reached their furthest decline in the holocaust of World War II, centuries after Sotah was written. *ELM*

<sup>3</sup> “[The Elijah to Come](#)” goes into detail of this prophecy that has a double fulfillment, John the Baptist and an unknown “Elijah” to appear in our future. *DWS*

<sup>4</sup> “[The Intertestamental Period](#).” Many Mishnah writings were the “traditions of men,” the teachings Jesus criticized in the Gospels (Mark 7:1–23). Some parts of the Mishnah are useful history, such as the Temple description in the Middoth. *DWS*

<sup>5</sup> The six divisions or topic areas of the Mishnah and Talmud are:

1. *Zeraim*, literally “seeds,” covering all agricultural rules and laws for foods as well as all blessings
2. *Moed*, literally, “holiday,” dealing with the rituals of Shabbat and other Jewish holidays
3. *Nashim*, literally “women,” examining all the issues between men and women such as marriage, divorce, etc.
4. *Nezikin*, literally “damages,” covering civil and criminal law
5. *Kodshim*, literally “holy things,” concerning laws of the Temple
6. *Taharot*, literally “pure things,” concerning laws of spiritual purity and impurity. (“[The History of the Talmud](#).”) *DWS*

means it pertains to legal matters involving women. Sotah itself refers to “The Suspected Adulteress” who was to be tested with the bitter waters to see if she was an adulteress (Numbers 5:11–31).

It is this title “Sotah” which provides us with our first mystery concerning the messages in this book. For the first six chapters of Sotah the theme is precisely what the title suggests: “Rules concerning the Suspected Adulteress.”

But with the start of chapter seven (to be precise, with 7:2) another theme is encountered which appears to have nothing to do with Sotah. The new subject involves “Blessings and Cursings” that are to be made in Hebrew (the Holy Language) or in the languages of the seventy nations (the other nations of the world). This discussion lasts for two chapters (chapters 7 & 8).

Then we come to chapter nine of the Sotah, the concluding chapter. It is much longer than the others, and it gives us the title of this article: “The Strange Ending to Sotah.” Chapter Nine deals with the expiation for an unsolved murder where a heifer’s neck was to be broken (Deuteronomy 21:1–9).<sup>6</sup> On the surface this chapter is devoid of any teaching concerning Sotah, except to say that the rite of the bitter waters was rescinded before the Temple was destroyed because so many adulteries were committed that the rite became no longer relevant (Sotah 9:9).

### *Chapter Nine Appears to be Out of Context*

The subject of this concluding chapter of Sotah really concerns that of the authority of the great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (the Supreme Court) to deal with undetected murderers, and not outward matters concerning a Suspected Adulteress as the title denotes. It also discusses the authority of local courts in dealing with the same thing, and it concerns judgments upon Jewish societies in dealing with murderous acts in which the murderer(s) of a person could not be found.

The Rabbis even ask a question on whether the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem could be accused of unjustly murdering someone. This query is in a context of showing how “Elders from Jerusalem” would be summoned to a dead body found between two towns to measure which town was the nearest, to determine which town would break the neck of a heifer (Deuteronomy 21:1–9). The Elders would wash their hands saying that they were not responsible for the blood of this dead person. Sotah states:

**“The Elders of that city washed their hands in water at the place where the heifer’s neck was broken, saying, Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it.”**

• *Sotah 9:6, Danby translation*

But then the Rabbis in Sotah ask a question:

**“But can it enter our minds that the Elders of the Court [Sanhedrin Elders] are shedders of blood?”**

• *Sotah 9:6 Danby*

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 21:1–9:

<sup>1</sup> If one be found slain in the land which YHWH your God gives you to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who has slain him: <sup>2</sup> Then your elders and your judges shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities which are round about him that is slain:

<sup>3</sup> And it shall be, that the city which is next unto the slain man, even the elders of that city shall take an heifer, which has not been wrought with, and which has not drawn in the yoke;

<sup>4</sup> And the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer unto a rough valley, which is neither eared nor sown, and shall strike off the heifer’s neck there in the valley: <sup>5</sup> And the priests the sons of Levi shall come near; for them YHWH your God has chosen to minister unto him, and to bless in the name of YHWH; and by their word shall every controversy and every stroke be tried:

<sup>6</sup> And all the elders of that city, that are next unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley: <sup>7</sup> And they shall answer and say, ‘Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it.’ <sup>8</sup> Be merciful, O YHWH, unto your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and lay not innocent blood unto your people of Israel’s charge.’ And the blood shall be forgiven them.

<sup>9</sup> So shall you put away the guilt of innocent blood from among you, when you shall do that which is right in the sight of YHWH.” DWS

In a word, the later Rabbis are asking, what if the perpetrators of the murderous act were Elders of the Sanhedrin itself? What should then be done? No answer is given on this matter. But, why bring up such a subject unless the Rabbis thought this was possible? This is when the context of Sotah begins to talk of events connected with Jesus.

### ***Jerusalem Exempt from Certain Rituals***

As a matter of fact, the Elders of the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem were exempt from offering the heifer as an expiation for such shedding of blood. **“Jerusalem does not bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken”** (Sotah 9:2). Furthermore, the expiation of the heifer was not necessary according to the Rabbis if the murdered person was found on a heap of stones, floating in the water or, and note this carefully, if he were hanging on a tree (Sotah 9:2).

The reason I am bringing up these points that are raised in Sotah 9 is because this very section is where the later Rabbis bring in a parable about the arrest, trial and excommunication of Jesus our Lord.

They knew that Jesus was found guilty by the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem and excommunicated from Israel for practicing magic and that he was hanged on a tree. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* has compiled several statements from Talmudic sources about the death of Jesus.

**“They hanged Jesus on the eve of Passover. Forty days earlier a proclamation was issued that he was to be stoned for practicing sorcery and for enticing and leading Israel astray.”**

**“Let anyone who can speak in his favor come forward.”**

**“Nothing in his favor was discovered and they hanged him on the eve of Passover.”**

• *Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. X, p. 5*

In other references, they first hanged him and then they stoned him to death to agree with the law of execution in Deuteronomy 21:22. In the *Temple Scroll* from the Dead Sea area obtained in 1967, it showed Jewish executions were to hang on a tree, and then the person shall be killed [by stoning].<sup>7</sup> In the Syriac Version of Deuteronomy 21:22 it says **“He is hanged on a tree and is put to death** [by stoning].”<sup>8</sup> In these references (and there are others) the hanging on the tree, as in the case of Jesus, came first and then the person was later stoned. No heifer’s neck was to be broken to expiate those who found a person hanging on a tree. And in the case of the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, it was already exempt from offering such a heifer. **“Jerusalem does not bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken”** (Sotah 9:2).

In spite of this, the later Rabbis still asked the question (in this context of introducing Jesus into the discussion) whether the Sanhedrin could bring “blood guilt” upon itself for doing such a crime of murder? **“But could it have come up into our minds that the Elders of the Court [the Sanhedrin itself] were shedders of blood?”** (Sotah 9:6). Or, in another way of putting it: “What if it Sanhedrin itself was guilty of shedding such blood?”

In contrast to the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, if the Elders in other townships found a person murdered between towns, one town had to break a heifer’s neck and say: **“Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it”** (Sotah 9:5 quoting Deuteronomy 21:7). Sotah continues:

**“And the priests say, ‘Forgive, O Lord, thy people Israel whom thou hast redeemed, and suffer not innocent blood in the midst of thy people Israel.’ They needed not to say, ‘And the blood shall be forgiven them.’ But the Holy Spirit proclaims to them, ‘Whosoever ye do thus the blood shall be forgiven them.’”**

• *Sotah 9:6 Danby translation, quoting Deuteronomy 21:5*

The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, however, which tried and sentenced Jesus our Lord, was exempt from having

<sup>7</sup> Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, 3 volumes, English translation (Jerusalem: 1984), column 64. DWS

<sup>8</sup> Yadin, *Temple Scroll*, 220. DWS

to make such a declaration or to break a heifer's neck as an expiation for guilt, and also his death happened while he was hanging on a tree and that also exempted them.

It is in this context of Sotah that prompted the later Rabbis to bring up the subject of Jesus. They do so in this special section of the Talmud. They do it by giving a parable about Jesus. I will show why they put it in Sotah in a moment.

### ***The Theme of the Concluding Section of Sotah***

The subject matter in this final section of Sotah leads to a discussion on what caused the downfall of the Jewish Commonwealth and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans and the ruin of the Holy Temple of God. It starts in Sotah with the mention of a murderer by the name of Eleazar ben Denai who was a notorious bandit.

He was so famous (a better word would be “infamous”) that he was mentioned by Josephus the Jewish historian in two of his works, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.118–124, 20.160–166 and *Jewish Wars* 2.252–253 (Loeb edition). This last reference is where Josephus said Eleazar flourished as a bandit and murderer for twenty years — starting his career in crime about 30 to 32 AD. The chronology is not completely clear. It is important to our present discussion that we note this was near the year that Christ Jesus was judged and crucified by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court). Jesus was tried and condemned at the Passover season in 30 AD. It was also at this very period when Eleazar began his murderous rampage.

The Rabbis in Sotah start their lament on the decline of the Jewish Commonwealth with the activities of this murderer (9:9). The criminal career inspired by Eleazar spilled out into the Jewish society itself and continued until the society in Palestine got particularly bad from the time of Nero's death in 54 AD onward, as Josephus attests. What is interesting is the fact that Josephus also says that the activities of this same man (Eleazar ben Denai) were the start of a series of calamitous events that led to the fall of the Jewish Commonwealth. Note a series of quotes by Josephus.

**“From that time [the death of Nero] the whole of Judaea was infested with bands of brigands.”**

• **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.124, Loeb edition**

Josephus continues:

**“In Judaea matters were constantly going from bad to worse. For the country was again infested with bands of brigands and impostors who deceived the mob. Not a day passed, however, but that Felix [the Roman administrator] captured and put to death many of these impostors and brigands.”**

• **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.160–161, Loeb edition**

**“Certain of these brigands went up to the city [of Jerusalem] as if they intended to worship God. With daggers concealed under their clothes, they mingled with the people ... they slew some because they were private enemies, and others because they were paid to do so by someone else. They committed these murders not only in other parts of the city but even in some cases in the Temple; for there too they made bold to slaughter their victims, for they did not regard even this as a desecration.**

**This is the reason why, in my opinion, even God Himself, for loathing of their impiety, turned away from our city and, because He deemed the Temple to be no longer a clean dwelling place for Him, brought the Romans upon us [the Jewish nation] and purification by fire upon the city, while He inflicted slavery upon us together with our wives and children; for He wished to chasten us by these calamities.”**

• **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.164–167, Loeb edition**

### ***Sotah Parallels Josephus' Account***

Note this point clearly. In Sotah, the Jewish authorities in 200 AD (when Rabbi Judah put together the Mishnah) rehearsed the same thing that Josephus stated. They began their lament with the bandit Eleazar.

**“When Eleazar ben Dinai came** (and he was also called Tehinah ben Parishah) **they changed his name** [Eleazar’s] **to Son of the Murderer”** (Sotah 9:9).

- Beginning with this man who initiated his murderous career near the time of Christ’s crucifixion, the later Rabbis rehearsed a litany of calamitous events in a progression that led to the physical and spiritual downfall of the Jewish Commonwealth.
- The Rabbis immediately follow their reference to Eleazar ben Denai with a statement that the nation also had to disband the rite of the bitter waters for the Suspected Adulteress because of the excess of adulterers that were encountered in that period.
- Then they record two events of the past in which laws were changed that led to wrong directions for the nation.
- They then mention the ceasing of the activities of the Sanhedrin with the ruin of Jerusalem and comparing it with the time when the early prophets died and the Urim and the Thummim<sup>9</sup> were taken away from Israel.

These cumulative events that started to occur, finally led to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. Sotah continues: **“Since the day that the Temple was destroyed there has been no day without its curse”** (9:12).

### ***The Progressive Ruin of the Jewish Nation***

Leading up to the destruction of the Temple and beyond, the Rabbis began to relate in Sotah ominous events associated with prominent Jewish leaders who lived in the period of this decline. These events showed the steady and certain deterioration of everything Jewish that the nation held in honor and esteem, and how the people were reduced to the lowest level of existence imaginable.

They began their historical account in Sotah of how the great and honorable men of Israel began to die off from the time that Eleazar the Murderer began his dishonorable acts and how the nation was left destitute because of it. This was also the time when Jesus was tried and sentenced to die by the Sanhedrin. Notice some of the lament being expressed in the generation just before and after the destruction of Jerusalem.

**“When R. Meir died there were no more makers of parables.**

**When Ben Azzai died there were no more diligent students.**

**When Ben Zoma died there were no more expounders.**

**When R. Joshua died goodness departed from the world.**

**When Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel died the locust came and troubles grew many.**

**When R. Eleazar ben Azariah died wealth departed from the Sages.**

**When R. Akiba died the glory of the Law ceased.**

**When R. Hanina ben Dosa died the men of good deeds ceased.**

**When R. Jose Katnutha died there were no more saintly ones.**

**When Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai died [he saw the Temple destroyed] the splendor of wisdom ceased.**

**When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died.**

**When R. Ishmael ben Piabi died the splendor of the priesthood ceased.**

**When Rabbi [Rabbi Judah the compiler of the Mishnah] died, humility and shunning of sin ceased”**

• *Sotah 9:15, words in brackets are mine*

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<sup>9</sup> Urim and Thummin are generally understood as stones in the breastplate of the High Priest (Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8; Deuteronomy 33:8; 1 Samuel 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65). When questions were put to God in the presence of the Urim and Thummim, they reacted in a way that was interpreted as an answer from God. How it worked is not known. DWS

That does not end it. Sotah states this condition would continue in Israel and among the Jewish people until the signs of the Messiah appear on the horizon. The generation just before the arrival of the Messiah will be exceptionally evil for the Jewish people (so the record in Sotah continues), but Jews will finally come to the position of directing their pleas to God in heaven to help them in their plight. They will then say: **“On whom can we stay ourselves?”** [all will then answer] **“On our Heavenly Father”** (9:15, italics and words in brackets mine).

Then there is a final comment in Sotah of a Rabbi by the name of Phineas ben Jair. He said that if the Jewish nation in the last generation will indeed heed the appeal in Sotah to put their faith on the Heavenly Father, this is what will happen to them.

**“Heedfulness [to the Father] leads to cleanliness, and  
cleanliness leads to purity, and  
purity leads to abstinence, and  
abstinence leads to holiness, and  
holiness leads to humility, and  
humility leads to the shunning of sin, and  
the shunning of sin leads to saintliness, and  
saintliness leads to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and  
the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead. And  
the resurrection of the dead [including a resurrection of the nation] shall  
come through Elijah of blessed memory. Amen.”**

• *Sotah 9:15, last verse*

### *The Exaltation of the Jewish Nation*

This large and extended concluding section of Sotah 9:15 has as its theme not only the historical downfall of the Jewish nation and people to the lowest levels that any people could reach, but then it immediately follows with a prophetic scenario of what will happen in the period leading up to the arrival of the Messiah and the prophesied Elijah just before the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5–6).

This final section of Sotah leaves the Jewish people with a promise of great hope and encouragement. It shows an account from their own Rabbis which was written over 1700 years ago relating what will happen to them in the future when they repent of their ways and return to being the type of Israelites that their Heavenly Father had in mind from the beginning. The future is glorious indeed, and this repentance and consequent exaltation, with the Holy Spirit in their midst, will come in the days of the Messiah and Elijah. To bring it to pass, Elijah is to come first.

This is precisely what Jesus told his disciples about the last days. They asked Jesus:

**“Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Elijah truly shall first come and restore all things.’”**

• *Matthew 17:10–11*

There is coming a time in the not too distant future when the Jewish people will be sent a person in the spirit of Elijah (like John the Baptist) who will lead them into a national repentance. This will happen when God sends “a spirit of grace and supplications” to the people of Jerusalem and Judaea. Even the top government people will change their ways into a repentant attitude to God and to their Messiah (Zechariah 12:10–14). This **“spirit of grace and supplications”** will result in the nation beginning to mourn for the one “whom they have pierced.” John 19:37 shows this to be Jesus of Nazareth:

**“But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it [John, an eyewitness] bare record, and his record is true: and he knows that he says true, that you might believe.**

For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, 'A bone of him shall not be broken' [Psalm 34:20]. And again another scripture says, 'They shall look on him whom they pierced' [Zechariah 12:10]."

• John 19:34–37

### *The Hidden Teaching of Sotah*

We now need to consider some of the most important parts of this “Strange Ending to Sotah” We will also see why the history of the decline and fall of Judah was placed by the Rabbis in Sotah. This section of the Talmud also has clear references to Jesus, though the information is primarily presented by the use of cryptic language and the use of a parable. Using parables was not a strange method of teaching to the Jews. Even Jesus himself adopted this style of teaching the people of his time. **“Without a parable spoke he not unto them”** (Matthew 13:34). The apostle Paul (and others) also used the teaching method of parables and figures of speech (1 Corinthians 10:4; Galatians 4:21–31; and Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19 where the word “figure” *parabole* in Greek). There are also many instances in the Talmud where parables are used.

Parables are often symbolic teachings which normally distort a true chronology, geography and or personality, to exaggerate a principle or a theme in order to highlight a specific teaching. However, the true facts behind the parable can be discovered if one looks beneath the surface to see the actual intent of the writer. In this section of Sotah in the Talmud there is a parable about Jesus. The parable deals with judgment and excommunication. It was thought essential to enter the account of this parable into the Talmud.

Indeed, the parable is not only in Sotah, it is also in the Tractate of the Talmud called Sanhedrin (107b). But note this. In some later editions of the Talmud, the parable about Jesus is censored (expunged) from its normal place in both Tractates Sanhedrin and Sotah.<sup>10</sup>

It was taken out so that later readers of the Jews might not refer to it. This was essentially because the parable was clearly about Jesus of Nazareth and it was in a context of discussion in Sotah which was not flattering to the Pharisaic Rabbis who were referred to in the parable. But there is more to the subject than that. Later, some Jews wanted to expunge (or were ordered to expunge) this section of Sotah.

### *Extensive Editing in this Section of Sotah*

The paragraphs of chapter nine of Sotah (the concluding part of the Tractate we have been discussing) have several edits where the names of Jewish men and even Gentiles are changed. Professor Danby, who translated the Mishnah in 1933, states that the last four paragraphs which speak about the signs of the Messiah and the Elijah to come are not in many manuscripts of the Mishnah, and he was of the opinion they did not belong in the Mishnah (Danby translation, Sotah 9:15, page 306, note 5).<sup>11</sup>

The fact is, however, there are enough manuscripts available (and many of them are not censored or edited) that Jewish scholars today know full well what was originally in the concluding section of Sotah. It certainly expresses the sentiments and teachings of the early Rabbis who lived in the period of the Talmud (3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). So certain were the translators of the Soncino Edition of the Talmud that the censored parts are indeed a part of the original text that they state without hesitation that the parable about Jesus certainly

<sup>10</sup> Lauterbach, *Rabbinic Essays*, 475–476, 481. The information about censorship of the Talmudic manuscripts is contained within his long essay, “Jesus in the Talmud,” 473–570. DWS

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah: translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and brief explanation* (London: Oxford University Press: 1938/1958 ed.). The note on p. 306 gives Danby’s opinion. It reads as follows:

**“Cambridge text reads ‘R. Liezer’ (Eliezer). The rest of the chapter does not belong to the Mishnah [Danby’s opinion]. Neither Maim. nor Bert. Includes it in his commentary. It is included in the Mishnahs prefixed to the two Talmuds, though certain editions omit the final paragraph.”**

The two Mishnah scholars mentioned: “Maim.” refers to the commentary on the Mishnah by Moses Maimonides (1135–1205), and “Bert.” refers to the Mishnah commentary by Obadiah of Bertinoro (d. 1510). Both of their commentaries were based on the copies of the Mishnah they had in their possession. So, even though he believes the information should not be included, Danby is honest to note that others might disagree with his opinion and look for the censored material elsewhere. DWS



concerns the Jesus of the New Testament (Sanhedrin, Soncino ed., p. 736, n. 2).

No one knows for sure why the censoring was done in Sotah. Was it to appease Catholic orders that parts offensive to Christians be taken out of the Talmud (which became popular in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) or because Jews themselves did the censoring for theological reasons? Whatever the case, Sotah was censored in some manuscripts at the very sections where references to Jesus were originally made. Indeed, the parable about Jesus and the narrative of the progressive calamities that led to the downfall of Judaea supposedly have nothing to do with the original context of Sotah about the “Suspected Adulteress.” But this is not the case.

The Rabbis wanted to take a biblical point. In Ezekiel chapter 23, God appraised the nations of Israel and Judah as adulteresses. They were so far gone that even the rite of the bitter waters was rescinded. So God sent them “bitter waters” of another kind — many calamitous events that led to their fall. Even the parable about Jesus deals with what the prophets called Judah’s adulterous condition.

### *The Significance of the Parable*

The parable about Jesus is found in Sotah 47a and in Sanhedrin 107b of the Talmud.<sup>12</sup> In Sanhedrin a context is given that mentions Gehazi (the servant of the prophet Elishah<sup>13</sup>). He became a leper because he wrongfully asked the Syrian military leader Naaman to give him a gift after Naaman was healed of leprosy after Elishah told Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Because of his sin and “imposed leprosy” he inherited from Naaman, Gehazi was banished from Israel (it was reckoned as an excommunication). He fled to Syria where we later find Gehazi in the court of Naaman.

But, instead of being banished from society as were all lepers, we later find Gehazi near King Naaman, still being called **“the servant of the man of God”** (2 Kings 8:1–6, especially verse 4).<sup>14</sup> It appears that Gehazi received Naaman’s leprosy, but soon afterward he was healed of that affliction and brought back to his former status as a statesman.<sup>15</sup> This was similar to Moses becoming temporarily leprous (Exodus 4:6) and Miriam suffering leprosy for seven days (Numbers 12:9–15). It is this narrative about Gehazi (and the temporary leprosy imposed on him by Elishah) that prompts the latter Rabbis to place the parable of Jesus in Sotah.

### *The Parable of Jesus Is Introduced*

This very spot concerning Gehazi in the context of Sotah is where we find the parable of Jesus. It is given at this juncture because the Rabbis wanted to show a distinct parallel between the events of Gehazi becoming a leper at his rebellion to Elishah, and how he was excommunicated from Israel for his evil deeds. Jesus is given a similar treatment in this Talmudic parable of Sotah 47a (text on the left, my notes on the right):

<sup>12</sup> Both cover the same incident expressed with slight differences. Scroll down to the appropriate place. Read the footnotes!

<sup>13</sup> Elisha’s name is spelled “Elishah” in the Talmud. DWS

<sup>14</sup> Second King 8:1–6, note verse 4 where Gehazi is again **“the servant of the man of God”**:

<sup>1</sup> Then spoke Elisha unto the woman, whose son he had restored to life, saying, ‘Arise, and go you and your household, and sojourn wheresoever you can sojourn: for YHWH has called for a famine; and it shall also come upon the land seven years.’ <sup>2</sup> And the woman arose, and did after the saying of the man of God: and she went with her household, and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years.

<sup>3</sup> And it came to pass at the seven years’ end, that the woman returned out of the land of the Philistines: and she went forth to cry unto the king for her house and for her land. <sup>4</sup> And the king talked with **Gehazi the servant of the man of God**, saying, ‘Tell me, I pray you, all the great things that Elisha has done.’

<sup>5</sup> And it came to pass, as he was telling the king how he had restored a dead body to life, that, behold, the woman, whose son he had restored to life, cried to the king for her house and for her land. And **Gehazi** said, ‘My lord, O king, this is the woman, and this is her son, whom Elisha restored to life.’ <sup>6</sup> And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed unto her a certain officer, saying, ‘Restore all that was hers, and all the fruits of the field since the day that she left the land, even until now.’” DWS

<sup>15</sup> In 2 Kings 5:27, Elisha told Gehazi: **“The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto you, and unto your seed for ever [olam, for the age]. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.”** It was temporary, but it also affected Gehazi’s **“seed,”** meaning his children or other descendants. DWS

“What was the incident with R. Joshua ben Perahiah? When **King Jannaeus** put the Rabbis to death. **Simeon ben Shetah** was hid by his sister, whilst **R. Joshua ben Perahiah** fled to Alexandria in Egypt. **When there was peace**, Simeon ben Shetah sent this message to him [to R. Joshua]:

‘From me, Jerusalem, the Holy city, to thee in Alexandria in Egypt. O my sister, **my husband dwelleth in thy midst and I abide desolate.**’

R. Joshua arose and **came back** and found himself in a certain inn where they paid him great respect. He said: ‘**How beautiful is this aksania.**’ One of his [Joshua’s] disciples named **Jesus** said to him, ‘**My master, her eyes are too narrow!**’ He replied to him, ‘**Wicked person! Is it with such thoughts that thou occupiest thyself?**’

He sent forth four hundred **horns** and **excommunicated him**. [Later], **the disciple** came before him on many occasions, saying, ‘**Receive me.**’ but **he** refused to notice him.

One day while Rabbi Joshua was reciting the Shema, **he** came before him.

**His intention was to receive him** and he **made a sign to him with his hand**, but **the disciple** thought he was repelling him. So **he** went and **set up a brick** and worshipped it.

- Alexander Jannaeus, king of Israel, 104–78 BC
- “Simeon ben Shetah” was a famous Pharisee<sup>16</sup>
- another Pharisee, “R. Joshua,” is the story’s hero
- “peace,” King Jannaeus on his death bed repented and advised his Queen to trust the Pharisees
- *i.e.*, his teacher
- “came back” from Egypt
- “*aksania*,” means “inn” or a “female innkeeper,” a barmaid of questionable morals, like Rahab (Joshua chapters 2 and 6)
- the Jesus referred to here is Jesus of Nazareth — **remember, this is a parable, an allegorical story!**
- “horns” were blown in excommunication ceremonies
- “excommunicated him,” Jesus, - “the disciple” is Jesus
- “he,” the Pharisaic Rabbi
- “he,” Jesus
- R. Joshua’s “intention” was to finally accept Jesus
- R. Joshua put forth his right “hand” with the palm out
- Jesus “the disciple,” and - Jesus, “he”
- Jesus supposedly “set up” a tile for idolatrous purposes like Jeroboam did when he came out of Egypt<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Simeon ben Shetah was a famous Teacher of the Law and president of the Sanhedrin during the reigns of Alexander Jannaeus and his successor, Queen Alexandra (Simeon’s sister). Simeon was a Pharisee who became High Priest. He started schools in Judea to teach Pharisaical doctrine. He replaced many Sadducees in the Sanhedrin with Pharisees. “**Simeon recalled from Alexandria the Pharisees who had been compelled to seek refuge there during the reign of John Hyrcanus, among these fugitives being Joshua b. Perahyah.**” Pharisees gained great influence among the Jewish people and Simeon became known as “**the restorer of the Law.**” Article, “Simeon ben Shetah” in Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 Volumes (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 357.

A similar school taught a man named Saul, later the Apostle Paul, “**brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel [a Pharisee], and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as you all are this day**” (Acts 22:3). He was raised “**a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee**” (Acts 23:6; and Philippians 3:5). The Pharisees also expanded and perfected the Synagogue as a teaching institution, “**and gave it an important and central place in the religious life of the people.**”

“**Thus they [the Pharisees] developed the Synagogue service which consists of prayer and reading from the Scriptures. This was in line with their democratic tendencies and with their regard for the needs of the people at large which, Josephus tells us, characterized the Pharisees.**”

Jacob Lauterbach, *Rabbinic Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union Press, 1951) 139. The synagogues helped Judaism survive the trauma of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. They were also very useful places for the apostles to begin their evangelizing. See “[Synagogues and Ekklesias](#)” for more information on this subject. DWS

<sup>17</sup> In 1 Kings 12:26–31, Jeroboam set up two idolatrous calves for worship, one at Bethel and one at Dan. There is no mention in the biblical text that Jeroboam brought any idolatrous item from Egypt. This is found only in the Talmud. Jesus never did such a thing. Similar to sins in his own day that precipitated the rebellion against Rome, Josephus felt that idolatry in Jeroboam’s day began the process of degradation to destruction, *Antiquities of the Jews* 8:229:

“**When Jeroboam had said this [after placing a sacred calf in a temple at Bethel and a temple in Dan], he deluded the people, and made them to revolt from the worship of their forefathers, and to transgress their laws. This was the beginning of the miseries to the Hebrews, and the cause why they were overcome in war by foreigners, and so fell into captivity.**” DWS

R. Joshua said to **him**, 'Repent;' but **he** answered **him**,

'Thus have I received from thee that whoever sinned and cause others to sin is deprived of the power of doing penitence.'

A Master has said: **The disciple** practices magic and led Israel astray."

Sotah 47a

- "him," Jesus, and - "he," Jesus

- "him," R. Joshua

- "The disciple," Jesus, who the rabbis said performed magic, a reference to the miracles He performed.

The parable is ended.

### *The Interpretation Explaining the Parable*

The parable is not too difficult to understand.<sup>18</sup> The subject is that of a prominent Rabbi who flourished about 120 years before our Lord. Why do we see this early date for the parable, long before Jesus was born? That is not a problem. This was the period when the Pharisees and the Scribes first came to power in Israel.

In the parable, the later Rabbis placed Jesus as being against the ones who initiated Pharisaism. It is as if we today might say that George Washington learned his principles of government in going against the monarchy and establishing republicanism at the feet of Oliver Cromwell who was also against the monarchy and heeded republicanism. (And note, Cromwell lived 120 years before Washington).

Since Jesus was indeed critical of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew chapter 23, for example), the parable simply places Jesus as being contemporaneous with the start of (and an enemy of) Pharisaism. With that understanding, reread the parable.

But why is the parable placed within a context of Gehazi obtaining the leprosy of Naaman and then being healed of it? Christians were teaching that Jesus was the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13 and on through all of Isaiah chapter 53. This was a reference to the Messiahship of Jesus. Jewish Pharisaical interpretation of the Suffering Servant was also Messianic. It was common to think that the person of the prophecy would be a leper. He was called **"the Leprous One."** References in the Talmud are specific.

- Mentioning the verse: **"Surely he has borne our sicknesses,"** the Talmud states that this verse refers to their prophesied Messianic redeemer. They said: **"The Messiah, what is his name? The Rabbis say, The Leprous One [or] The Sick One"** (Sanhedrin 98b).
- Also: **"The Lord was pleased to bruise him, he made him to be sick"** (Berekoth 5a). And though Christians normally taught that Jesus was not sick a day in his life (and many Jews accepted this as the teaching of the New Testament, which it was not), they were prone to connect the sickness of leprosy with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (their Messiah).

And so, we find that in the parable, Jesus is given a sickness like Gehazi obtained. This gave Jesus Messianic claims. The parable begins to mention Jesus when Rabbi Joshua ben Perahiah returns from Egypt. It was also thought that Jesus had returned with Joshua.

Joshua described the "inn" or the "female innkeeper" as beautiful, but Jesus said she was **"narrow of eyes."** Female innkeepers were notorious for being harlots, like the house that Rahab the harlot had kept (Joshua 2:1).

The prominent Rabbi thought the innkeeper beautiful, but Jesus did not. A little later in Sotah we find the Rabbis saying that even **"the council-chamber [of the Rabbis] shall be given to fornication."** Jesus was criticizing this prominent Rabbi of the Sanhedrin for perpetuating and abetting fornication. So, the Rabbi

<sup>18</sup> This parable was written anywhere from sometime in the 200s to the 400s AD. Christianity had been around for some 130 to 330 years. DWS

acted to excommunicate Jesus and the horns were blown.<sup>19</sup>

### *Jesus Accepted by the Pharisees*

But if any Elder (as Jesus was) would dispute with the decisions of the Sanhedrin, the disputing Elder was tried at Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, excommunicated from Israel, and then killed. See Sotah 45a in the Talmud (in the book Sotah) where this sentence is explained in detail.

Then an extraordinary thing happens. After Rabbi Joshua excommunicated Jesus, the parable says Jesus made constant appeals to receive him back. And though Rabbi Joshua resists for a while, he then relents and decides to accept Jesus. The parable states that the Rabbi finally put up his hand to accept Jesus. This was a reference to the fact that the majority of the Pharisees (and the general population of the Jews in Palestine) did in fact accept Jesus after his resurrection.

We have the plain statement of James, the legal brother of Jesus, who was head of the Christian community in Jerusalem, that there were tens of thousands of Jews who believed Christ and the Christian teachings in 56 AD (Acts 21:20 where the KJV “thousands” actually means “**tens of thousands**”).<sup>20</sup> It could be reasonably believed that perhaps half of the Jewish people at Jerusalem were Christian oriented.

Even Joshua, the Rabbi of the parable, accepted Jesus and put up his hands to receive him like Elishah did Gehazi. Recall that Gehazi became a leper at first, but he was healed of his leprosy and allowed back in the service of a king (unidentified. King of Judah, Israel, or Syria? It is not said.) having been restored to being “**the servant of the man of God [Elishah]**” (2 Kings 8:4).

And whereas Jesus had been sickly (though not with leprosy) fulfilling the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and bearing sickness like Gehazi bore Naaman’s sickness, after His resurrection Jesus was sick no more. He was then glorified and full of health.

The parable shows that though the Pharisees were at first willing to accept Jesus (as the parable said the Pharisaic Rabbi did), the Jesus of the parable now took a brick [a tile with an idolatrous image on it] and supposedly began to practice idolatry.

There is a reference in this context of Sotah where it says that this was like Jeroboam who came out of Egypt who set up the idolatrous worship at Bethel and Dan. The parable thus has Jesus coming out of Egypt with the Rabbi, but then going into idolatry. Of course, Jesus did not do this literally, but by the time the parable was written it was common for what were then called the followers of Jesus to be engaged in idolatrous

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<sup>19</sup> Remember, this parable retrospectively gave a Pharisaical justification for the killing of Jesus, who after all was a heretic. Recall Peter’s explicit words at Pentecost in Acts 2:22–24:

**“You men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as you yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, **YOU have taken, and by wicked hands [YOU] have crucified and slain: Whom God has raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it** [held by death].”**

Later the apostles healed multitudes of people, and word went out so more people came from outside Jerusalem to be healed at Solomon’s porch at the Temple. The apostles were seized by the chief priests, imprisoned, and supernaturally released (Acts 5:12–19) by an angel. The angel told them to return to the Temple and “**speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life,**” which they did (verses 20–21). They were seized again and disciplined by the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, the high priests, and the Captain of the Temple (verses 22–28). Peter spoke for the apostles in front of the religious officials, Acts 5:29–31:

**“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, ‘We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you slew and hanged on a tree. Him has God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.’”** DWS

<sup>20</sup> Acts 21:19–20:

**“And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him [Paul], ‘You see, brother, how many thousands [Greek, *urias*, ten thousand] of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law.”** DWS

worship like that which developed from Jeroboam. The later disciples of Jesus were then reckoned to have a form of Judaism but it was a false worship like Jeroboam established. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD there were indeed many Christians establishing image worship in their services. The Jews saw this as idolatry, which, of course, it was. Indeed, many “believing” Jews did not stay long in Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Jewish Messianic Expectations in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD***

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD the generality of the Jewish Christians were expecting the Kingdom of God to be set up in that generation.<sup>22</sup> When this did not occur by 63 AD (the time expected for the last seven years of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks Prophecy to begin), Jewish people began to abandon Christianity almost wholesale. Peter and Jude (in Peter’s second epistle and Jude’s short letter) said that most of the Jewish Christians finally gave up on Jesus and they went to war with the Romans.<sup>23</sup> This led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They did this in spite of the fact that there were countless signs and wonders that God gave to the Jewish people at that time. Note what the Talmud states began to occur the very year Jesus was crucified, 30 AD:

**“Forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin was banished** [from the Chamber of Hewn Stones in the Temple] **and sat in the Trading Station** [also in the Temple, east of its former site, the Chamber of Hewn Stones].”

• ***Shabbath 15a***

This was no doubt the very time the curtain tore in two from the top down when Jesus was crucified (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45).

**“Our rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the lot [‘For the Lord’] did not come up in the right hand; nor did the crimson colored strap become white; nor did the western most light [of the Menorah] shine; and the doors of the Hekel [to the Holy Place] would open by themselves.”**

• ***Yoma 39b***

- The Rabbis who wrote the parable of Jesus in Sotah were well aware of these important signs beginning with the precise time of Jesus’ crucifixion. Even they in this section of Sotah began their litany of decline for the Jewish people with the activities of Eleazar the Murderer, who started his career at the exact time of the crucifixion of Jesus.
- They also knew that the Sanhedrin had done things in regard to Jesus that were unjust and in the concluding section of Sotah they themselves were wondering what the penalty would be to the Sanhedrin?
- At the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, the whole of the nation started to drink the bitter waters of Sotah which progressively identified them with the Israel and Judah of Ezekiel chapter 23.
- And though the later Rabbis were aware that perhaps half of the Jewish nation in Palestine went over to a belief in Jesus after His resurrection (and they were pure in heart) because the evidences to identify him as the Messiah were so great, later Rabbis also knew that the generality of the Jewish people

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Martin’s book, [The People that History Forgot](#) explains the process how idolatry conquered the churches. The result was pagan Christianity. See also [“Idolatry – The Curse of Religion.”](#) DWS

<sup>22</sup> For a full explanation, read [“The Expectation of Christ’s Second Coming in Apostolic Times.”](#) DWS

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Martin gives the historical background and events leading to the Jewish war resulting in the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. [“Restoring the Original Bible,”](#) particularly [“Chapter 14: The Prophetic Environment of the First Century”](#) and [“Chapter 16: The Jewish/Roman War and Canonization.”](#) DWS

rejected Jesus as the Christ right after 63 AD and went to war with the Romans. That war ended the Jewish state.

This account of the decline and fall of Judah for the sin of their spiritual adultery is the strange ending in Sotah.

### *A Positive Ending*

But note what the very end of Sotah contains. It has a happy ending. It shows a time at the end of the age when an Elijah will come to the Jewish people. They will then turn to their Heavenly Father and to Jesus as their Messiah, and they will repent of their ways (as all in the world must do). They will then soar into a glory and joy that Israel has never known before. At that time, “The Strange Ending to Sotah” will be a happy one for Jews and for everyone.

Ernest L. Martin, 1995  
David Sielaff, September 2016

### *Appendix to “Strange Ending to Sotah”*

Several scholars have dealt with the issue of Jesus being mentioned in Jewish writings, particularly about the passages in the Babylonian Talmud discussed above. For example this statement,

**“In the Middle Ages, Jews who had studied Talmud converted to Christianity and began drawing attention to these negative portrayals of Christianity found in traditional Jewish literature. From that point on, these polemical stories denigrating Christianity became a dangerous liability for Jewish communities under Christian rule. The passages often claimed to refer to Jesus are vague, inaccurate, and inconsistent on many biographical details when compared to the Gospels and each other.”**

• **Douglas Mangum, “Jesus in the Talmud”**<sup>24</sup>

One recent examination of Jesus mentioned in Talmudic literature (in PDF format) is Peter Schäfer’s book [\*Jesus in the Talmud\*](#) (Princeton University Press, 2007). Here are the chapter titles:

- |  |                                 |  |
|--|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. Jesus’ Family                         | 4. The Torah Teacher            | 8. Jesus’ Punishment in Hell                       |
| 2. The Son/Disciple Who Turned out Badly | 5. Healing in the Name of Jesus | 9. Jesus in the Talmud                             |
| 3. The Frivolous Disciple                | 6. Jesus’ Execution             | <b>Appendix:</b> Bavli Manuscripts and Censorship. |
|  | 7. Jesus’ Disciple              |  |

Schäfer presents details about the censorship of the Talmudic manuscripts, giving the same reasons Dr. Martin points out in the article: (1) Jews diminished their mention of Jesus in order to reduce notice of their criticism of Him, and (2) well-meaning Christian leaders requested they diminish mention of Jesus to reduce persecution of Jews by Christians. This may well be true. Whatever the case, enough manuscripts remain to make clear the censorship was extensive but not complete.

This article by Dr. Martin provides insight into Jewish thought about Jesus, several decades or centuries after His resurrection. Jewish leaders themselves were questioning the actions of their predecessors. They knew God punished the nation with the destruction of the Temple and city of Jerusalem, but they wondered if their treatment of Jesus the Messiah was a contributing cause or even a major cause of God’s punishment.

As God’s chosen people, Israel represents mankind in their killing Christ. You and I would do the same given their circumstances as God led them to act (Acts 2:23). Why? Because God is in charge and He chooses vessels to honor and dishonor (Romans 9:18–21). Yet **“All Israel shall be saved”** (Romans 11:26) as God **“is the Savior of all men”** (1 Timothy 4:10).

David Sielaff, September 2016

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Mangum, “Jesus in the Talmud,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).