

# The prophet **Yeshu**

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# Contents

- **1** General considerations
- **2a** A look back to 250 BCE
- **2b** The arrival
- **3** A brief historical overview c. 140-100 BCE
- **4** A brief historical overview c. 100-63 BCE
- **5** The founder: Who was he?
- **6** The founder: Who was he? (Cont.)
- **7** The founder: Who was he? (Cont.)
- **8** The Dead Sea Scrolls, Yeshu, and Samaria
- **9** The ministry of Yeshu
- **10** Family ties
- **11** Family ties (cont.)
- **12** Family ties (and a correction)



# The prophet Yeshu

## Part 1

### General considerations

*Buddhism, Christian origins, John the Baptist, Samaritans, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

The preceding series of posts, "[Yeshu ha-Notsri as the founder of Christianity](#)," is now complete. Those fifteen posts serve as an introduction to a new account of Christian origins presented on this website. The series began with an examination of the figure Yeshu ha-Notsri in the Talmud, an obscure figure that Christians have long considered anomalous and quite curious. We investigated what exactly the Talmud has to say about Yeshu, brought those clues together, and constructed a preliminary biography of the prophet.

Yeshu lived in the early first century BCE. He was a Pharisee, a protégé of the leading Pharisee in Judaism, Joshua ben Perachiah. Joshua and Yeshu (together no doubt with other aristocratic Jews, their families, and servants) fled to Alexandria in Egypt when war broke out between the cruel King [Alexander Janneus](#) and the Pharisees (Josephus Ant. 13.14 etc). In an earlier post I suggested this flight was in the 90s BCE, but I have now refined my calculation to 88–82 BCE. While it is possible that Pharisees fled the country earlier, civil war between Janneus and the Pharisees broke out c. 88 BCE, and the infamous crucifixion of 800 opponents of Janneus took place c. 83 BCE, as far as I have been able to tell.

Thus, if Yeshu were born c. 100 BCE (per the dating of [Abraham ibn Daud](#)), then we have a broad window for his flight to Egypt with Perachiah—Yeshu would have been between twelve and eighteen years old upon arrival in Alexandria. The Pharisees definitely did not

return to Palestine before Janneus' death in 76 BCE. This means that Yeshu's stay in Egypt probably lasted between six and twelve years. In fact, he could have stayed longer in Egypt, because once he was excommunicated by Perachiah it is doubtful that he would have hurried back to Palestine.

We have seen that the foregoing skeletal account receives confirmation from disparate sources including the Talmud, Epiphanius (who lived before the Talmud was assembled), and the medieval Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Daud. There is enough material and mutual confirmation in these accounts that the historian can be sure *somebody* lived with the above general biographical details. We further learn from the Talmud that Yeshu subsequently "led all Israel astray" and that he was finally executed at Lydda (Lod), according to strict stipulations in Jewish religious law.

We can also infer some related information of a general nature regarding Yeshu's parentage and career. He was somehow related to the "government" (*malkuth*). He was obviously very important—or, at least, very influential/successful—otherwise the Jews would simply have forgotten him. But they didn't. He is noted in numerous passages of the Talmud, which also betrays considerable sensitivity regarding this prophet—not only does it use a number of pseudonyms for him (including Yeshu, Balaam, Ben Stada, etc; see Herford, *Christianity in Talmud & Midrash*).

But some passages express regret, no doubt due to the unusual course of events that eventually led to the rise of a new religion. Thus in one place the rabbis take Perachiah to account for his handling of the young upstart: "Ever let the left hand repel and the right hand invite, not like Elisha who repulsed Gehazi with both hands, and not like R. Jehoshua ben Perachiah who repulsed Yeshu with both hands" (b. Sanh 107b).

The Talmudic accusations against Yeshu are that he made himself God, that he practiced magic, that he “worshipped a brick,” and that he led Israel astray. These, together with his excommunication and execution, show that Yeshu was no longer considered Jewish, a “Jew.” (His alternate name *Balaam*, incidentally, means “Not of the People”—Zindler.)

In these posts I have suggested that, while in Alexandria, the young prophet became acquainted with Buddhism—which I view as a ‘pure’ form of gnosticism. The Buddhist connection appears quite clear to me because the subsequent teachings attributed to Jesus in the gospels and elsewhere (apocryphal Christian writings, etc) betray numerous and strong Buddhist parallels as presented in my *Buddhist and Christian Parallels* ([online](#)).

In the preceding post I pointed out that the name “Yeshu ha-Notsri” is not a birthname. It is an ascription, in this case given by the Talmudic rabbis. *Yeshu* derives from the root yod-shin-ayin meaning “salvation,” while *notsri* derives from the root nun-tsade-rish, meaning “watch, guard, keep, preserve” (including “keep hidden,” BDB 665 f). In other words, Yeshu ha-Notsri can mean “Salvation the Watcher,” or some such.



At left is a Buddhist “book” on strips of palm leaves, bound with string through two holes. The Buddhist sutra (“discourse”) at right is on thin slices of wood (possibly bamboo). The pages are kept on top of each other by thin sticks, which go through two little holes in scripture. When not used, the scripture is covered in cloth and kept in the box.

Also, in the preceding posts I noted the Samaritan chronicle of Abu'l Fath. It relates a good deal about a certain Dositheus, who also came out of Egypt, taught a strange doctrine which involved dipping into water (= gnosis), and that he had writings **written on palm leaves** (Bowman 166)—a clear link to distant India, where Buddhist sutras were written on palm leaves. According to the medieval Abu'l Fath, Dositheus was hunted down by the High Priest Akbon and executed. While G.R.S. Mead also claimed "Aboulfatah places Dositheus 100 years B.C." (**Fragments of a Faith Forgotten**, p. 163), I have been unable to verify this provocative claim, unless we interpret "Akbon" as the High Priest Hyrcanus II (a seductive possibility), who was active towards the middle of I BCE.

In an unrelated tradition, the Pseudo-Clementine literature (Hom 2.24) also confirms that Dositheus came out of Egypt and relates a good deal about his activity in relation to the disciples of John the Baptist. For these and various other reasons, I conclude that Dositheus was none other than the talmudic Yeshu ha-Notsri.

The identity of Yeshu and Dositheus, however, is only one important step along the path towards unraveling Christian origins. I pointed out in the preceding post that, etymologically, "Jonathan" and "Dositheus" are equivalent—both mean "Gift of God" (Semitic, Greek). Much of the confusion in the ancient accounts between whose disciples went to whom (those of Dositheus, Simon Magus, Jesus, and John the Baptist) in various traditions is dispelled by drawing an equivalence between Dositheus and John the Baptist. Further reasons can be given for this equivalence (such as that both Dositheus and John particularly insisted upon spiritual purification by immersion in water) which, hopefully, I will detail in future.

Finally, in the preceding post, I also presented the equivalence between John the Baptist and Simon Magus—this based upon the semitic root a-m-d. The word *amad* in Aramaic means "go down,

plunge, immerse, baptize" (Payne-Smith 416). In Jewish scripture, however, the word means "stand, be firm" (BDB 763), with the primary OT usage described in a prior post: "worthy of *standing* before the Lord" (i.e., proven, innocent, free of guilt). The linguistic equivalence between baptizing and standing has particular relevance in regards to John "the Baptist" and Simon "**the Standing One**". Both baptizing and standing will prove to be two important concepts in early Christianity.

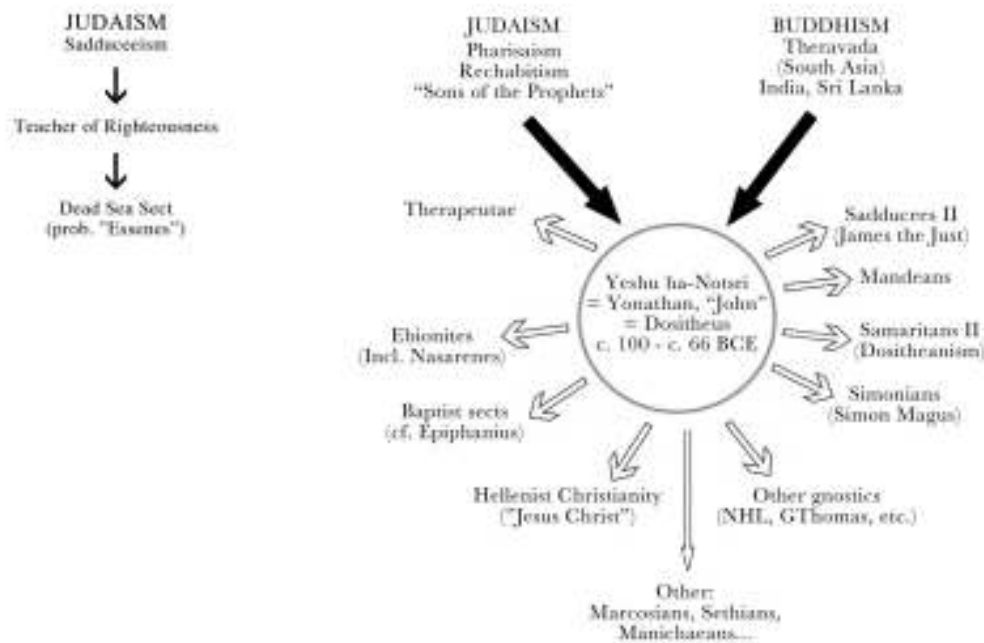
We recall that, according the Pseudo-Clementine account, Simon Magus is supposed to take over John the Baptist's disciples upon the latter's death, but Dositheus temporarily usurps that position. In the canonical Christian tradition, many of John's disciples go over to Jesus and, at the same time, many people (including King Herod!) think that Jesus is John raised from the dead. In my opinion, all this overlap in discipleship and biography, *combined with the linguistic and theological equivalences* raised above, ineluctably show that all of these figures are really one.

## **The next steps**

We now begin to explore the ramifications of the above discoveries. The previous series of fifteen posts ("Yeshu ha-Notsri as the Founder of Christianity") is by way of *introduction*. I doubt it will be possible to understand my projected upcoming posts (still on the drawing board) unless one has first read and digested the material in the first series. The traditional Christian just 'dropping in,' as it were, will be quite lost. And so will any reader who has not first gone through the 'undergraduate course' of the first series of posts. However, the preceding paragraphs in this very post provide a quick review of that undergraduate course.

If one accepts that Yeshu ha-Notsri = Dositheus = John the Baptist = Simon Magus, as I do, then an entirely new view of Christian origins emerges. In this light, it would seem that Yeshu ha-Notsri (I will call him

by that name for the present) was the catalyst for the formation of many, many groups in the Levant around the turn of the era. A chart follows that presents the general lines of development. Two great streams of religious tradition combined in Yeshu ha-Notsri: the stream of Judaism, and the stream of Buddhism. This combination was unique, potent, and extremely productive.



A new account of Christian origins, in schematic form (provisional)

We can now begin to identify the original theology that underlies all these figures. We can also flesh out the biography of that remarkable prophet who was the source of a great many movements long considered unaffiliated but that were in fact siblings, offshoots of one and the same parent. Like a precious crystal shattering into many parts, numerous apparently disparate movements came from the same original ministry. Each fragment of the crystal preserves an aspect of that ministry, an aspect of the 'truth.'

Historically, each tradition has been treated separately—Mandaeans (disciples of John the Baptist), Dositheans/Samaritans, Ebionites/

Baptists, Pauline Christians. This is possible to do *after* the traditions diverge. If, however, the traditions have a common ancestor, then *in the earliest stages* they must be viewed synoptically. Academe and Church have not been able to do this, because they will not admit to links between these groups. After all, *that* would be heresy.

An important chronological point: we can now appreciate that the earliest stage of Christianity goes back not to the turn of the era but three generations earlier, to about 65 BCE (the ministry of Yeshu/John). For our purposes, the Roman invasion of Palestine in 63 BCE is the watershed event that separates the time of the prophet (apparently executed in the mid-60s BCE) from the first generation of disciples.

This new, earlier, chronology permits the inclusion into early 'Christian' history of many heretofore excluded movements, including the sect by the Dead Sea (DSS), the Therapeutae of Alexandria (Philo), the pre-Christian Nasarenes (Epiphanius), and the 'pre-Christian' Mandeans (Bultman, Lidzbarski)—to name only some obvious possibilities.

Hence, in the upcoming posts, I freely consult from the literature of all these long marginalized groups. They have a great deal to teach us about earliest Christianity.

## Part 2a

### A look back to c. 250 BCE

#### *Buddhism, Christian origins*

The aristocratic young Pharisee—Yeshu ha-Notsri to the later Rabbinical scholars—stood on firm religious shoulders, on hallowed tradition already ordered, analyzed, codified, and even memorized. The problem for him and for his early followers was that the tradition upon which Yeshu stood was emphatically *not* the tradition of his forefathers. It was, simply put, not the Mosaic tradition so foundational to the chauvinistic and exclusive Jewish religion, to its culture, and to its self-identity. Not to Yahweh, not to Moses, not even to Jewish scripture—after his conversion to Buddhism Yeshu was pointing to a very different source of salvation. The Buddhists call that source nirvana (literally “extinguishing”), or “enlightenment.” In the West, this is known as *gnosis*.

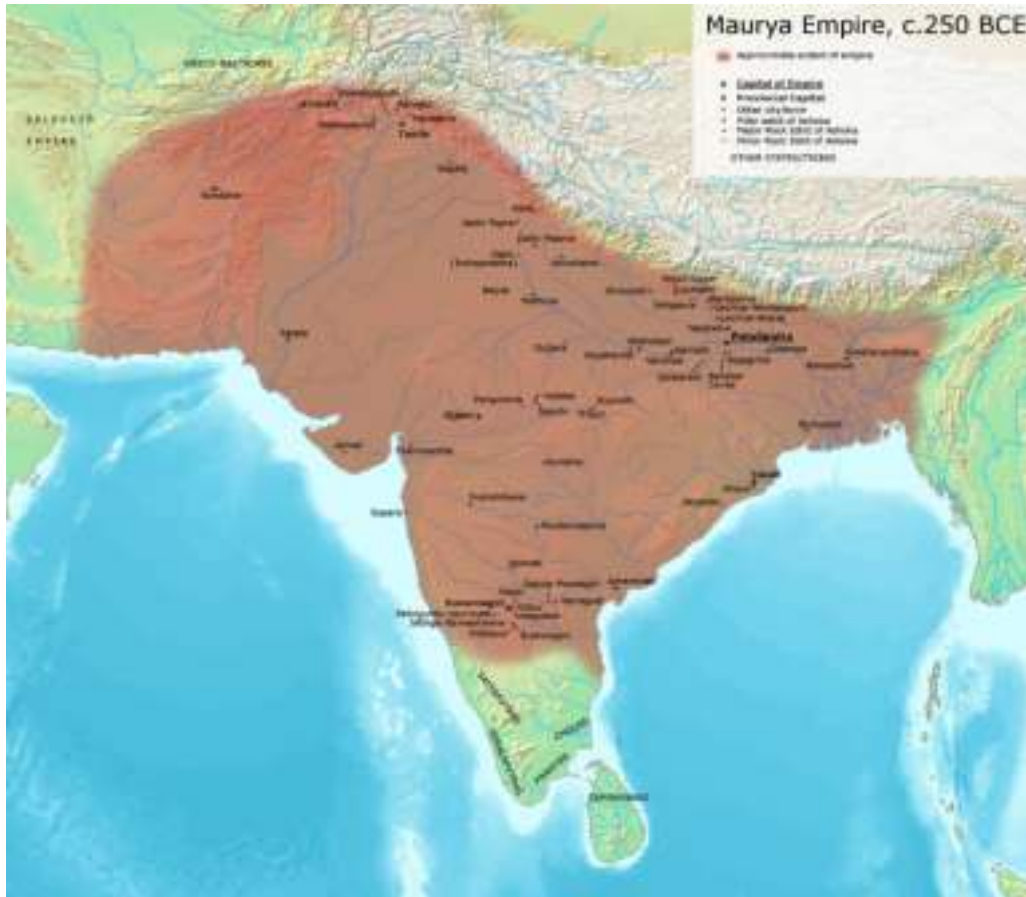
As mentioned before, the Talmud associates Yeshu with the ‘government’ (*malkuth*) of Israel. I will try to pin down his exact relation to the ruling family of Israel (and thus his identity) in a future post. But I don’t doubt the clues given by the ancient sources that he was a very important person. For now, we note that Yeshu was *excommunicated* for his beliefs and teachings. In Yeshu’s case, and despite his enviable religious, social, and political links, there was obviously no middle ground. Judaism reflexively vomited him up as one might vomit up poisoned food.

In Yeshu’s generation the Pharisees were just on the verge of taking control of the government. They were powerful enough to incite wars and rebellion (against Janneus, for example). Being in the ascendant, phariseeism was in no mood to appease an upstart, someone who was

obviously marching to an entirely different drummer. This dynamic allows us to understand the religious forces that produced, for example, the Essenes. In the view of myself and some other scholars (e.g. K. Atkinson 2018:13), they came into existence towards the middle of 1 BCE (some of Josephus' chronologically dislocated statements notwithstanding). I personally maintain that the Dead Sea Sect was essentially a Jewish reaction *against* the gnosticism of Yeshu. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I will treat the Essenes (whom I consider linked to the Dead Sea Scrolls and also to the Ebionites) at another time.

As regards Buddhism's arrival to the West (much overlooked today), the seminal event would have been Ashoka's sending out of Buddhist missionaries in many directions, particularly to Alexandria. Ashoka's Buddhist mission to the court of Ptolemy is described on one of the pillars the Indian monarch erected in his realm (see below). Thus, long before Yeshu was born, the teachings of Buddhism were on the ground in Egypt.

The actual event in the mid-third century BCE is all but forgotten, remarked by hardly anyone today or in the past. Nevertheless, the arrival of Buddhist monks from India was surely one of the greatest events in world history—at least, if one considers religion as an expression of the *ultimate*, of man's quest for meaning and purpose. The historian Arnold Toynbee agrees with this estimation: "Future historians will consider the meeting of Buddhism and Christianity at their deepest levels as the most important single event of this century." *Of this century?!* Toynbee was referring to the contemporary meeting of East and West in scholarship (his words were written in 1960). But the latter day 'academic' meeting of Buddhism and Christianity pales beside the event itself, which took place about 250 BCE.



The Empire of Ashoka the Great

At that time, the Greek **Ptolemy II Philadelphus** was Pharaoh of Egypt and Emperor **Ashoka** ruled over India. Both monarchs were rather exceptional beings. The Indian 'Alexander the Great,' Ashoka conquered the greater part of India and all contiguous regions. Eventually, however, he found himself massacring entire populations that he didn't know—and also for reasons that he didn't know.

After one particularly frightful campaign in which Ashoka exterminated over 100,000 Kalingas and deported the remnant, he suddenly converted to Buddhism, put away the sword, and became a pacifist. Ashoka the Great, as he is often called, realized that the Sage of the Sakyas (the Buddha) had been right: hatred ceases not by hatred, but only by love (**Dhammapada 5**).

Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism was one step in a long chain of events—perhaps an inevitable chain of events—that eventually led a prophet in Palestine to perplex his listeners with a strikingly Buddhist and manifestly un-Jewish teaching: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from him who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt” (Lk 6:27-29).

In stark contrast to his previous murderous efficiency, Ashoka's new-found pacifism, frugality, and charity became legendary. He set up hospitals along the thoroughfares of his vast kingdom, way stations for weary travelers and even for sick animals. He promoted tolerance and admitted all religions with equal respect. The emperor also set up pillars of stone throughout his kingdom. He inscribed them with the Dharma, that is, with the teachings of the Buddha. Ashoka spared no effort, no expense, to promote the religion he now held dear.

The Pharaoh Ptolemy Philadelphus also merits the epithet “the Great” but was of a very different character—ebullient, intellectual, perceptive, flamboyant... Philadelphus was a strange mixture of the profound and the superficial. He appreciated quality yet had a demonstrable weakness for the cheapest expressions of exoticism. In modern parlance, he ‘liked to party.’ Ptolemy was a *bon vivant*, expansive, extravagant, with limitless ambition to make Egypt first in the world—and, of course, to make himself first in Egypt. **The following** gives the flavor for the sort of person he was:

A festival, called the Ptolemaia, was held in Ptolemy I's honor at Alexandria every four years from 279/278 BC. The festival provided an opportunity for Ptolemy II to showcase the splendor, wealth, and reach of the Ptolemaic empire. One of the Ptolemaia festivals from the 270s BC was described by the historian Callixenus of Rhodes and part of his account survives, giving a sense of the enormous scale of the event. The festival included a feast for 130 people in a vast royal pavilion and athletic competitions. The highlight was a Grand Procession,

composed of a number of individual processions in honor of each of the gods, beginning with the Morning Star, followed by the Theoi Soteres, and culminating with the Evening Star. The procession for Dionysus alone contained dozens of festival floats, each pulled by hundreds of people, including a four-meter high statue of Dionysus himself, several vast wine-sacks and wine krateres, a range of tableaux of mythological or allegorical scenes, many with automata, and hundreds of people dressed in costume as satyrs, sileni, and maenads. Twenty-four chariots drawn by elephants were followed by a procession of lions, leopards, panthers, camels, antelopes, wild asses, ostriches, a bear, a giraffe and a rhinoceros. Most of the animals were in pairs - as many as eight pairs of ostriches - and although the ordinary chariots were likely led by a single elephant, others which carried a 7-foot-tall golden statue may have been led by four. At the end of the whole procession marched a military force numbering 57,600 infantry and 23,200 cavalry. Over 2,000 talents were distributed to attendees as largesse.

On a more serious note, Ptolemy II expanded (or perhaps even founded) the famous Library at Alexandria. He turned it into the first institution of its kind, not just a repository for writings but also an unrivaled educational institution and cultural center (the Museion) with over one thousand resident scholars (including Archimedes and Euclid), all supported by the state. Though probably apocryphal, legend has it that Ptolemy allowed no ship to dock in Alexandria without first handing over new texts for its library. It was at the Museion that, in all likelihood, the Septuagint was translated from Hebrew into Greek, this also during the period we are considering, c. 250 BCE. Incidentally, the young Yeshu must have lived near the Museion during the years of his Alexandrian exile, for the Jewish quarter of that city is in the very same neighborhood (see [here](#)).

We know that Emperor Ashoka and Ptolemy were in contact (→ [here](#)). These two curious monarchs exchanged embassies from a great distance, and one flattered the other with unusual and expensive gifts. Ptolemy received elephants, peacocks, tigers, and other animals for his Ptolemaiai, as well as spices and silk (from China), while Ashoka received costly perfumes, papyrus scrolls, camels, gorillas, nubian

musicians, and perhaps some pithoi of the best Egyptian beer and Judean wine.

But these overtures were preliminary to the *real* embassy that Ashoka had in mind—sharing the Buddha’s message (the *Dharma/Dhamma*, the *Buddhavacana*, literally “Buddha-speech”).

The sea voyage from India to Egypt took many months one way and hugged the coastline. Only later, in the first century BCE, did ships begin to sail the open ocean using the trade winds (on this see the ancient maritime log, [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea](#)). In the third century BCE very few merchants or ships would have made the prohibitively long round trip between India and Egypt. Rather, the goods that were exchanged between these distant lands passed through a number of intermediaries, for neighboring ports en route were trading with each other continuously.



Part of Ptolemy II's extensively refurbished canal system.

Embassies at the highest level, however, were different. These were official business and commanded express service, so to speak. We can imagine Ptolemy bragging to Ashoka about his great Museion, the 'center of learning in all the world,' together with its fabulous library. When asked by Ashoka what he desired from India, Ptolemy would certainly have indulged his favorite obsession, answering "literature for my library"! Of course, Ashoka would have enthusiastically responded to that request with his own fanatical obsession: Buddhist *sutras* (discourses, lit. "threads")!

In order to facilitate trade with the East and South, Ptolemy laboriously reactivated **the old canal system** linking Lake Mareotis at Alexandria with the Nile River, and the river in turn with the Red Sea. This immense engineering and construction project occupied Ptolemy for years. When the new Egyptian canal system was finally complete, Ptolemy had a huge celebration, a Ptolemaion to end all Ptolemaiai, a three-day celebration of the new canal. And the crowning event of that incomparable celebration were very special gifts from the great Emperor Ashoka of faraway India.

In fact, we know from his stone edicts that Ashoka sent monks and attendant Buddhist literature to the entire known world, and in all directions: Egypt, Greece, Syria (the Seleucids), Bactria, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and other regions whose names we no longer recognize (see **edicts 5 and 13**).

[NOTE: Other posts on this website discussing Buddhist influence on Christianity are **here** and **here**.]

## Part 2b

### The arrival

*B.C.E. times, Buddhism, Christian origins*



Part of Ptolemy II's extensively refurbished canal system.

As we have read in the preceding post, in order to facilitate trade with the Far East and points south, the Macedonian Pharaoh Ptolemy

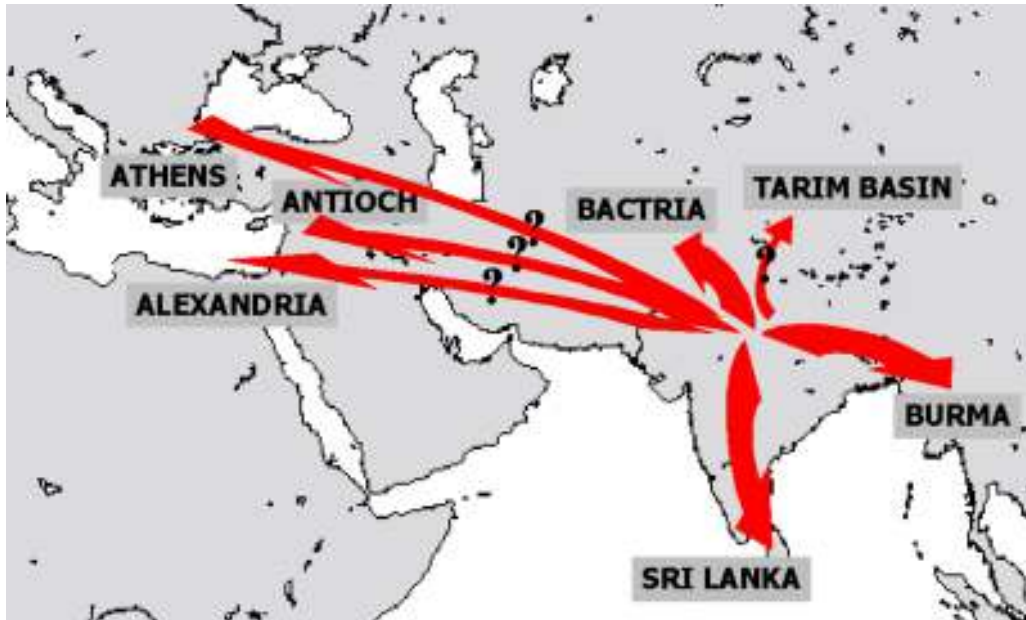
Philadelphus laboriously reactivated **the old canal system** linking Lake Mareotis at Alexandria with the Nile River, and the river in turn with the Red Sea. This immense engineering and construction project occupied Ptolemy for years. When the new Egyptian canal system was finally complete, towards the middle of the third century BCE, Ptolemy probably had a huge celebration, a Ptolemaion to end all Ptolemaiai, a **three-day celebration** of the new canal. And the crowning event of that incomparable celebration were very special gifts from the great Emperor Ashoka of faraway India.

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[NOTE: The following recreation of events uses considerable authorial license. No one today was there, and so we can't know for sure how the Buddhist sutras came to the West. The following is one possibility...]

## **The preparation**

At Emperor Ashoka's capital, Pataliputra on the Ganges (not far from where the Buddha roamed), the Buddhist missions to foreign lands were carefully planned in conjunction with the religious establishment (sangha). For Ptolemy's library in Alexandria, the entire Buddhist canon (well over one hundred manuscripts) would have been freshly copied out **on palm leaves and bound into 'books'**—a task requiring twenty scribes over a month to execute.



The Buddhist missionary activities of Emperor Ashoka, c. 250 BCE.

The greatest challenge, however, was selecting monks to go on these improbable missions to faraway lands, missions into the complete unknown with no likelihood of return. Ships were small, and Emperor Ashoka would perhaps have selected about six monks for his Buddhist mission to Egypt. Each monk would have been physically fit and travel-worthy, experienced yet not old, and above all accomplished in the Dharma (teaching)—able to represent the best that Buddhism can offer. In a sense, each monk would represent the Buddha himself.

The ability to memorize sutras and to recite them by heart was a key test of a monk's proficiency. The lead monk would have had **the entire canon** memorized—every single Buddhist scripture that was committed to writing. This is not hyperbole, for such command of memory has been recorded in the Buddhist tradition for millenia and is also well documented in ancient times. The other monks, however, would probably each have commanded selected sutras (discourses of the Buddha). Each would have been capable of teaching them without aid and would have been able to write them down anew if necessary. Of course, the most important *sutras* were memorized by all the

monks, including for example the **Kamala Sutra** (on finding one's own way, also known as the *Kesaputiyasutta*), the *Metta Sutra* (on loving the entire cosmos), and the **Fire Sermon** (on purifying the six senses).

## **The arrival**

Alexandria was the most cosmopolitan city in the world at the time, more prestigious than Rome (whose time had not yet come). No doubt Ashoka planned an especially impressive embassy for the extravagant and curious Ptolemy, an embassy that befitted the holy sutras he was sending West.

We can imagine the event on a fine day 2,270 years ago. Six Buddhist monks trained in austerity, self-control, mindfulness, and silence were **arriving by canal** to Alexandria, Egypt, after a grueling half-year voyage. Accompanying them was their precious cargo—trunks loaded with Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts.

Awaiting their arrival at dockside, with more than ordinary pomp, the **Ptolemaieia** would have been in full swing—perhaps already in its second or third day. The extravagant Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who liked a good party, would be surrounded by his court feasting on the dais while regaling the crowd with free food, wine, and an apparently endless series of colorful processions including acrobats, dancers, exotic performers of every description, drummers, pipers and other musicians, fire-breathers, contortionists, jugglers, leashed and caged elephants, bears, lions, tigers, giraffes, peacocks, gorillas, sundry captives, and anything else that would keep the crowd entertained.

*We can imagine...*

...suddenly a call rang out: "A ship is coming! A ship is coming!" yelled a boy, running through the procession and right up to the dais, pointing towards the south.

The rumor excitedly filtered through the crowd: "A ship is coming!"

Ptolemy rose, deliberately clapped his hands three times, then raised his arms and with a loud voice commanded, "Clear the dock! Make way for the ship from my beloved friend Ashoka, Emperor of India and of all the East!" But the crowd wasn't listening. It had suddenly exploded into loud drumming, incoherent dancing, and general revelry.

Ptolemy turned to his adjutant. "Okay. Pull all the wine and all the beer. Right now!" The adjutant quickly directed several squads of soldiers to infiltrate the crowd and confiscate all jugs of wine and beer. "And if anybody doesn't like it," the Pharaoh called after the adjutant, "throw him into the canal to cool off!"

He turned to his mistress Bilistiche with a smile. "Why not?" she said simply, and then added: "Well, you can't blame them. After all, they've been waiting three whole days for this."

The Pharaoh knew that a special shipment of Buddhists and religious texts was arriving, and that the monks and interpreter on board had been hand-picked by Ashoka himself. "Treat them kindly but modestly," Ashoka had written, "and above all, listen to them."

Ptolemy surveyed the general mayhem and realized that the present welcome at the dockside was hardly fitting for a solemn religious event. The realization suddenly caused him great irritation. The pharaoh turned again to his adjutant and sharply ordered, "Clear the way to the dock. Put down the red carpet. And line it on both sides with soldiers."

"Yes, your divinity."

Confusion in the procession, which was still attempting to pass, ensued as soldiers cleared a way to the dock. Some slaves rolled out a thin red carpet extending from the dais to the water's edge. Soon

members of the elite palace guard took up positions on both sides of the red carpet. Now cut in two, the procession started to back up on one side, with yelling coming from afar: "Hey, clear the way!" "What's the problem up there, you schmucks?" A leashed gorilla almost fell into the canal, and a rogue peacock ran onto the dais and past the Pharaoh.

When the **trireme** nosed around the bend the incoherent drumming became a rhythmic, steady beat. Pipers took up a rehearsed welcome song. The formalities did not calm the crowd but seemed to enervate it even more. People crowded closer to the dock and quite forgot to tend their animals. A group of dancing girls suddenly started gyrating and singing, twirling around with timbrels and ribbons. The Pharaoh signaled to his adjutant to stop them and a squad of soldiers soon approached the women who, however, quickly melted into the crowd. Ptolemy turned to Bilistiche. "What a mess!" he muttered.

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised and then back at the crowd. "It's life," she eventually observed with a shrug.

The ship finally pulled up to the dock. The oarsmen retracted their oars, ropemen fastened the boat to land, and the gangplank was attached. The crowd was now clapping in rhythm to the drums and the dancing girls had resumed in a different area. Ptolemy resolved to maintain as much dignity as possible and stood stoically on the dais, arms folded.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a bald head appeared above the gangplank. The face was calm, welcoming, slightly smiling, with friendly eyes cast downwards. Then the torso appeared, one shoulder bare, the other covered by the fringe of a saffron robe. A tall, middle-aged man soon stood motionless at the top of the gangplank, his palms clasped together, a saintly figure that seemed to tower over the crowd and to be miraculously suspended in mid-air.

The crowd suddenly quietened, the dancers became still, and the drumming also petered out. An uncanny hush gripped the entire proceeding—a “Buddha-calm.” Every eye fixed on that strange, bald, saffron-robed being. The Pharaoh stiffened, stared, and gulped.

Palms together, the monk descended the gangplank slowly and deliberately. He placed one foot on dry ground, then the other, and immediately went on both knees, touching his forehead to the ground. He remained in that position for what seemed like a long time, then stood up and turned. As he faced the boat, a second monk appeared and the crowd gasped.

He was young, similarly bald and clothed in a saffron robe. This monk cradled a box in his arms as a mother would cradle a baby. Also looking downwards, he descended the gangplank and gave the palm-leaf manuscripts to the lead monk. Then he went to his knees and similarly touched his forehead to the ground.

The Pharaoh descended from the dais and approached the lead monk. With palms upturned Ptolemy solemnly held out his hands, as one might indeed receive a baby. The monk slowly placed the precious manuscripts in the monarch’s hands.

“Thank you,” the Pharaoh said. “Thank you for coming so far for a mere wretch like me.”

Ptolemy returned to the dais and four more monks appeared from the boat in turn, each with more manuscripts. Finally the interpreter appeared, a Bengali who knew Greek. He approached the Pharaoh and said, “I am the interpreter. We come with warmest greetings from Emperor Ashoka, and with the teachings of the Buddha. We are now in your gracious hands. Do with us what you will.”

## Part 3

### A brief historical overview c. 140-100 BCE

*B.C.E. times, bibliographies/biographies Pharisees, Sadducees*

Christians as well as researchers into the origins of Christianity are very familiar with the historical dynamics and events in Palestine around the turn of the era—the Herodian dynasty, the Roman occupation, events leading up to the First Jewish War... The canonical gospels and later Church literature supplement (generally with unreliable or even invented material) the works of Josephus which, unfortunately, scholars are finding to be not always accurate.

Those of you who are following my hypothesis regarding Yeshu ha-Notsri (and I thank you for that interest) must, however, completely redirect your focus to a period about one century earlier. This post is not going to be a history lesson—I'm just going to furnish some basic historical facts available anywhere, but also some interpretations that I have arrived at, interpretations that are germane to our investigations but that are not necessarily held by mainstream scholarship.

The main historical sources for the early first century BCE, which belongs to the Hasmonean Period, are the books I and II Maccabees, as well as the works of Josephus. However, Josephus' famous analysis of Jewish sects into three principal parties (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, Ant. 18.1) is now commonly viewed as overly simplistic and even anachronistic—more relevant to the early first century CE than the early first century BCE, when these groups were still coalescing and searching for definition. The genesis of all three groups may remain forever shrouded in mystery. When the **Hasmonean dynasty** began c. 140 BCE, its first ruler **Simon Thassi** was emphatically not 'king.' He was leader (sometimes termed "Prince") and above all High Priest

ruling at the summit of a *theocracy*. Thus, the Jewish aristocracy of the early Hasmonean Period (late second century BCE) was a ruling priesthood, later known as the Sadducees (from *Tsadik*, “righteous” or, alternatively, self-described descendants of **Zadok**/Tsadok, the High Priest under Kings David and Solomon). The name “Sadducee” probably came into usage in opposition to the emergent Pharisees, a more progressive wing in Judaism that emphasized scholarship over ritual, and the so-called ‘oral Law’ (which the conservative Sadducees did not admit) in addition to the Torah or written Law. As Josephus relates, the Pharisees eventually (in the first century CE) became far more popular with the people: “they [the Sadducees] are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates... they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them” (Ant. 18.1.5).



This foregoing description by Josephus, however, was not the case c. 100 BCE. During the long reigns of both **Hyrcanus I** (Simon’s son, known simply as John Hyrcanus, r. 134-104 BCE) and Jonathan (better known as Alexander Janneus, r. 103-76 BCE) the Jerusalem priestly elite was still thoroughly dominant. John Hyrcanus was known as *Yohanan Cohen Gadol*, “John the High Priest.” John delegated considerable power to an “Assembly of the Jews” that later evolved

into the *Beit Din* ("House of Judgment"), also known as the **Sanhedrin**. Originally, this assembly was composed of priests. It met daily in the **Hall of Hewn Stones** of the Jerusalem Temple. However, as the Pharisees gained in power, the composition of the Sanhedrin changed. In fact, by the Roman conquest of Palestine in 63 BCE the Sanhedrin was already dominated by Pharisees.

In his brief reign of one year, **Aristobulus I** (the eldest son of John Hyrcanus) upset many people by declaring himself "king." Some religious Jews considered this an abomination, as the High Priest could not also be king. Josephus writes that Aristobulus was the first Jew in "four hundred and eighty three years and three months" to have established a monarchy since the return from the Babylonian Captivity. This move particularly infuriated the Pharisees. They perceived in it a crass attempt of the priestly Sadducean camp, via Aristobulus I, to seize and expand its power. The Pharisees began an armed rebellion, but Aristobulus died within a year after Judaizing the Galilee at the point of the sword and also destroying Shechem, the ancient religious capital of Samaria. Not a particularly nice fellow, in that brief year of power (104-03 BCE) Aristobulus also found time to murder his brother Antigonus I and to starve his mother to death.

### **Civil war between Janneus and the Pharisees**

In 103 BCE the pro-Sadducee **Alexander Janneus** succeeded his elder brother Aristobulus and, like his brother, he made himself king as well as High Priest. The Pharisees considered Janneus no more than a desecrated priest and resumed their rebellion. A bloody six-year civil war ensued, beginning in the late 90s BCE. Janneus killed whatever Pharisees he could find, and about 88 BCE he crucified 800 Pharisees in an infamous display of cruelty. It must have been around this time that the religious leader of the Pharisees, Joshua ben Perachiah, fled

to Alexandria in Egypt along with Yeshu ha-Notsri—as we discussed in [a previous post](#).

Janneus was the last powerful ally of the Sadducees. No priesthood would ever again dominate Judaism, a religion that now entered a long period of change, as the scholar-Pharisees slowly became the dominant force. Strife, civil warfare, and the eventual destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (c. 70 CE) all solidified the position of the Pharisees and doomed the Jewish priesthood.

It was towards the beginning of Janneus' reign that a gifted priest began to call for Sadduceean reform. He is referred to in the Dead Sea Scrolls as the Righteous Teacher, or Teacher of Righteousness (*Moreh Tsedek*). This 'John the Baptist' figure apparently organized a community near the Dead Sea, and I discuss him in the next post.

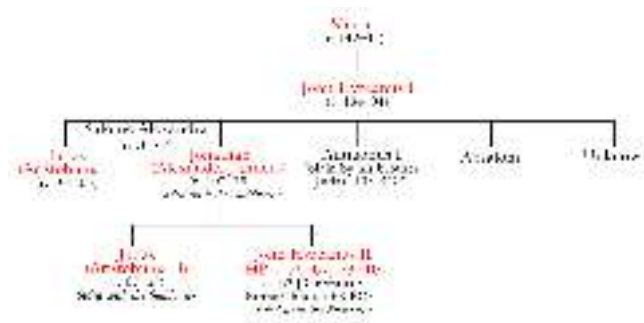
It was also about 100 BCE that Yeshu ha-Notsri was born.

## Part 4

### A brief historical overview c. 100-63 BCE (cont.)

*B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls*

About the time that Yeshu ha-Notsri was born (c. 100 BCE) a gifted priest began to call for Sadduceean reform. He is referred to in the Dead Sea Scrolls as the Righteous Teacher, or Teacher of Righteousness (*Moreh Tsedek*). This was the reign of Alexander Janneus, and the Teacher of Righteousness was evidently looked upon favorably by the king. We can conclude this on several grounds: (1) the Dead Sea writings are pro-priestly and thus generally aligned with the Sadducees, as also was King Janneus; (2) the DSS (as also Janneus) oppose the Pharisees, whom the scrolls label "Seekers of Smooth Things"; and (3) at least one Dead Sea work explicitly praises Janneus (see *In Praise of King Jonathan*, 4Q448).



Upon Alexander Janneus' death in 76 BCE, his wife Salome Alexandra became queen. In a momentous political about-face, Salome cast her lot on the side of the Pharisees. In fact, she herself was apparently related to the highest pharisaic echelon by blood, for her brother (or possibly cousin) **Simon ben Shetach** was the most powerful Pharisee in the land after Joshua ben Perachiah. During Salome's reign (76-67

BCE) or possibly a few years earlier when Perachiah was in exile, the aggressive and activist Shetach succeeded Perachiah as nasi, head of the Sanhedrin.

Historically, the Talmudic rabbis looked back on Salome Alexandra's reign as their glory days, though their enemies of the time were terrified. As soon as Alexandra took the throne, Perachiah returned to Israel from Egypt upon the jubilant entreaty of Shetach (recorded in the Talmud). *The already-excommunicated Yeshu, however, went to Samaria* where a long anti-Jerusalem tradition existed. During the reign of Alexandra Yeshu seems to have been accorded some leeway to operate (we will look at the reasons for this important consideration later, including his possible influence on the Queen). But shortly after Alexandra died in 67 BCE Yeshu was apprehended, given a full religious trial 'by the book' before the Sanhedrin, and executed. This event probably occurred c. 66 BCE during an initial brief reign of terror under the new king and High Priest, John Hyrcanus II. A few writings seem to suggest that the conquest of Israel by the Romans in 63 BCE was partly in retribution for Yeshu's slaying (to be discussed later).

On the other hand, the situation was reversed for the Teacher of Righteousness. During the pharisaic heyday of Salome's reign the Teacher of Righteousness would have found his continuing activity in Jerusalem intolerably dangerous. Of Salome's two children by Janneus, one (Hyrcanus II) was Pharisee-friendly, and the other (Aristobulus II) was Sadducee-friendly. While Hyrcanus would have urged the queen to suppress all Sadduceean supporters, Aristobulus evidently prevailed upon her to moderate any anti-Sadduceean actions:

But the principal of those [enemies of the Pharisees] that were in danger fled to Aristobulus, who persuaded his mother to spare the men on account of their dignity, but to expel them out of the city, unless she took them to be innocent; so they were suffered to go

unpunished, and were dispersed all over the country. (Josephus, Wars 1.5.3)

We read here, “to expel them out of the city.” I believe that the Teacher of Righteousness was among those who left Jerusalem during the reign of Salome Alexandra. Accordingly, I suggest these years—roughly 75 to 65 BCE—as the probable period of formation of the Qumran community by the Dead Sea.

The foregoing chronology of Qumran formation is compatible with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Michael Wise. He summarizes:

In short, we suggest a scenario markedly different from that of the Standard Model: the Teacher of Righteousness began his ministry late in the second or early in the first century BCE, perhaps during the reign of Alexander. After the Pharisees came to power under Salome [76 BCE], they persecuted the Teacher’s group... eventually hounding the Teacher into exile. When Hyrcanus II became king [67 BCE], he renewed his efforts to destroy the Teacher and his group. The Roman intervention [63 BCE] ended the Jewish civil war of Pharisee versus Sadducee, Hyrcanus versus Aristobulus. All of the verifiable historical references within the scrolls and the apparent attitudes of the scroll writers to those references fit this model exceedingly well. (*The Dead Sea Scrolls* 1996:32)

Not aristocratic at all (except in an elitist religious sense) the Teacher of Righteousness and his community (the *Yachad*) called themselves “the Poor” (*Ebionim*) and saw themselves as members of an elect outsider group. Technically, they were one of the *haburoth* or Jewish purity groups of the time (see M. Wise et al 1996:124). The Dead Sea sectarians attempted to live more perfect lives apart from the Jewish mainstream. Rigorous and intellectual, they even wrote texts that corrected the Jerusalem temple priesthood and its ritual (4Q MMT; the Temple Scroll). Thus, the members of the Community were a marginalized priestly group violently opposed to the Temple hierarchy in Jerusalem, whom they compared to a “tabernacle of David that is fallen,” to “those who walk in the counsel of the wicked,” to “those who

turn aside from the way,” and to “those who defile themselves with their idols”:

‘And I shall raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen’ [Amos 9:11]... [The interpretation] is he who will arise to save Israel. ‘Happy is the man that does not walk in the counsel of the wicked’ [Ps 1:1]. The interpretation of the passage is those who turn aside from the way... And they are the ones of whom it is written in the book of Ezekiel the prophet, ‘They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols’—**they are the Sons of Zadok and the men of their community.** (4Q174 1.i.12-17)

The Dead Sea Sect was also violently opposed to the Pharisees, whom they saw (correctly) as an anti-priestly movement. Exhorting purity and adherence to the Mosaic Law, the Dead Sea Scrolls are ultra-Jewish. Yet they are also reformist, for they exhort chastity and laud poverty. Neither of these latter characteristics is Jewish—but they are, surprisingly, Buddhist. To me this is evidence that Buddhism had percolated into the fringes of Judaism. Both Yeshu and the Teacher of Righteousness were influenced by Buddhism—one directly, the other indirectly. The TR reacted to these foreign religious winds from the East by retreating further into Judaism and becoming, as it were, ultra-Jewish. On the other hand, Yeshu converted to Buddhism and, in so doing, entirely overthrew the Mosaic law, fealty to Yahweh, the patriarchal narratives, and the myth of the Chosen People. And for this, Yeshu was excommunicated and eventually executed.

With a narrow, severe, and utopian vision, the TR may have authored some DSS texts himself (e.g. those marked to his representative, “the Instructor”). But most were probably written by the ensuing generations of his followers, including the commentaries (*pesharim*) on books of the Old Testament. A reading of the scrolls shows that the TR was a man of dignity, sincerity, and character—something of a ‘John the Baptist’ figure. While he was a powerful and no doubt charismatic reformer *within* the parameters of the Jewish religion, struggling with the winds of change, his younger contemporary Yeshu ha-Notsri was

also appearing on the stage of history as an apostate challenging the very foundations of Judaism itself. My reading of the scrolls suggests that both the TR and Yeshu interacted as adversaries, drawing adherents from each other's groups in what is tantamount to a heated sibling rivalry on the fringes of Judaism. I am certain these two religious figures either knew each other or knew *of* each other.

Thus Yeshu returned to Palestine at about the same time as Qumran formation. Yeshu was now a Hebrew by blood but no longer a Pharisee and not even a "Jew" by belief. Nevertheless, he did have significant ties to the government, as we will see in an upcoming post. Powerful ties will only go so far, however. Having been excommunicated from the religion of his heritage, Yeshu would have been opposed by practically everyone: Pharisees, Sadducees, as well as members of the Dead Sea Sect. With all these enemies, it appears that he chose to return not to Jewish territory at all but to Samaria, where a long tradition of anti-Judean sentiment existed. This was sometime during the reign of Queen Salome Alexandra.

## Part 5

### The founder: Who was he?

*B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Dositheus, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

#### The name

As mentioned [in a prior post](#) (last paragraph), the early first century BCE prophet known to the Talmud as “Yeshu ha-Notsri” doubtless had some other name in actuality. We know this because *Yeshu* means “Salvation” and *ha-Notsri* means “the preserver” (also “watcher, keeper of secret wisdom” etc). Nobody is born with the name “Salvation the Preserver.”

The later religious writings of various traditions vaguely remember the prophet under a number of pseudonyms. This shows that already in late antiquity the founder had attained mythical status, for his personal attributes (including his name) were soon discarded. The Talmud records at least three names: Yeshu ha-Notsri, Balaam, and ben Stada. Samaritan texts record Dositheus and Dusis. Mandaean texts record John. And Christian texts record Jesus of Nazareth.

I noted in the above-linked post that Yeshu’s actual name was probably Jonathan, “John.” The Hebrew name Jonathan (*Ya-nathan*) means “Yahweh/God Gives.” Its equivalents in Hebrew are Nathaniel (“God Gives”) and Mattanyahu (= Yahweh Gives, “Matthew”). Its equivalents in Greek are *Dositheus* and *Theodoros* (“Gift of God”). For uniformity and simplicity, in these posts I will generally use the name Yeshu ha-Notsri (or simply Yeshu)—his primary designation in the Talmud, cognizant that Jonathan is actually more correct. I will also make use of alternative names (Dositheus, John, Balaam, etc) when the need arises to discuss specific textual traditions.



If the prophet's name was indeed Jonathan, then we are dealing with an extremely common Jewish name. It was also a favorite name in the Hasmonean royal lineage. This is of some moment, because we have located the prophet chronologically to the early first century BCE (Ibn Daud, Epiphanius, other evidence)—that is, to the time of the Hasmonean kingdom—and we have also noted that the Talmud associates Yeshu with the *malkuth*, “the government” (b. Sanh. 43a; see *NazarethGate* 425). If Yeshu were indeed linked by blood to the Hasmonean dynasty, then it would make sense that he had the name “John,” as did so many Hasmoneans.

The fact that the young Yeshu fled into Egypt along with the head of the Sanhedrin, Joshua b. Perachiah, also suggests that Yeshu was an important person. At the very least, he must have been a member of the religious aristocracy.

### **A clue from Samaritan writings**

Considering that Jonathan is the linguistic equivalent of Dositheus, when we examine Samaritan records regarding the arch-heretic Dositheus/Dusis we come across an astonishing admission. At least two times, Dositheus is made to exclaim: “I am the son of the High Priest!” (Bowman 1977:164, 165).

And the High Priest Akbon [read: Hyrcanus II] searched for Dusis [read: Yeshu/Dositheus] but could not find him. For Dusis, because of his fear of the High Priest Akbon and the violence of his strength and the swiftness of his resolve, fled to Suwaika and lodged with a woman whose name was Amantu the widow, and said to her: “I am the son of the High Priest.” So she served him and he spent many days with her writing.

... So Levi [the actual High Priest's son according to the Samaritan author] went, accompanied by his men and came to Suwaika, entered the house of Amantu the widow, and said to her: "Is not my friend [!] Dusis with you, who deserves to be killed?" And she said, "I know not that he deserves to be killed, but I was exceedingly generous to him when he said to me, 'I am the son of the High Priest.' And I found him continually busy writing on these pieces of paper..."

These passages are from the medieval chronicle of the Samaritan Abu'l Fath. The chronicle dates almost 1,500 years after the facts it attempts to record and is certainly garbled. It must be used with great caution. Still, Abu'l Fath had earlier sources at his disposal and surely did not make *everything* up.

"Akbon" probably refers to Hyrcanus II (the voiceless velar "k" followed by "n" being the only elements of the name to survive). The citation reads, accordingly, as if Dusis is the son of Hyrcanus II. However, Hyrcanus II and Yeshu were contemporaries, and thus one could not have been son to the other. It is not surprising that Abu'l Fath might have the wrong Hasmonean here, for Hyrcanus II was by far the most memorable High Priest of the first century BCE, having served in that position during two lengthy periods: 76–66 BCE and again 63–40 BCE. Other than Janneus, the other High Priests had long since been forgotten to history, including to Abu'l Fath.

If Hyrcanus II is not chronologically a perfect fit to be Yeshu's father, then who else in the Hasmonean lineage served as High Priest around that time? Now, if (a) Yeshu was born c. 100 BCE (as is suggested by Ibn Daud, **as we have seen**), and (b) if he was related to the government (malkuth, as Jewish records allege), and (c) if he was the son of the High Priest (as the Samaritan Abu'l Fath alleges), then our choices narrow dramatically: Yeshu's father was *one of the five sons of John Hyrcanus I* (see chart above).

The names in red in the above chart served as High Priest of the Jews. They include two of Hyrcanus I's five sons. Let's immediately eliminate

Alexander Janneus as Yeshu's father, for Josephus and other historical records know only two children of Janneus, both quite famous and well-chronicled, neither tried and executed for his religious views (as was Yeshu), and neither having fled to Alexandria as a young man.

The only other obvious possibility is **Judas Aristobulus I**. He was High Priest for one year (104–03 BCE). This monarch was the first husband of Salome Alexandra. When Aristobulus I died, she married (**by levirate marriage**) his next younger brother and now king and High Priest, Alexander Janneus.

We must thus include the *possibility* that Aristobulus I was Yeshu's father. If so, Yeshu was born before 103 BCE (thus moving his birthdate back a few years) and *his mother was no less a figure than Salome Alexandra*, who later became queen. In fact, the name "Salome" plays a marginal and curious role in certain Christian apocryphal texts, including the Gospel of Thomas. There Salome asks Jesus, "Who are you, man, whose son?" (**saying 61**, Blatz translation). If Salome were herself Jesus/Yeshu's mother, this question is ironic indeed. Also, a certain Salome appears at a critical juncture in the *Protevangelium of James* (19.3 ff) and then disappears from the story as suddenly as she appeared. The reader has no idea who she is, but this Salome has a critical role: it is she who verifies that the mother of Jesus was indeed a virgin. And, let it be admitted, who would know this information better than the mother of Jesus *herself*? Thus, we have in the *Protevangelium* a curious link, again, between the prophet we are investigating and Salome—possibly Salome Alexandra, Queen of the Jews.

Salome being Yeshu's mother also would clear up another problem to be encountered in an upcoming post: why Yeshu was spared and allowed to preach during the short decade of Salome's reign (76–67 BCE), while the Pharisees hunted down and executed so many of their enemies.

The main problem I have with Yeshu's father being Aristobulus I is that I cannot fathom why Yeshu would then flee to Egypt during the reign of Janneus, his uncle as well as his father-in-law (for Alexandra was married to Aristobulus and then to Janneus). Also, is it conceivable that Joshua ben Perachiah, the Pharisee whose kinsmen were being slaughtered by Janneus, would take the king's own son-in-law under his wing and flee with him to Egypt? I think not... For these and other reasons I doubt that Aristobulus I was in fact the father of Yeshu. Rather, I suspect that some slight error has crept into Abu'l Fath's medieval report over the course of fifteen hundred years and that Yeshu was not literally the 'son' of the High Priest but was the nephew or cousin of the High Priest—that is, Yeshu was closely related to royalty but not in the immediate line of succession. Furthermore, Yeshu must have had real reason to fear for his life at the hands of King Janneus.

In the next part we will continue looking and will discover another intriguing possibility...

## Part 6

### The founder: Who was he?

*B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls*

As we seek basic answers to the origins of Christianity, it is worth noting that we are embarked on a sublime mission, one that is as necessary as it is difficult. We are not like children playing in the sand or adults gazing at the clouds. Our purpose is essentially to *understand*. This is the same purpose that motivated the ancient Gnostics, the Buddhists, the shamans... It is a quintessentially human undertaking. Our purpose, however, will not meet with success except with complete dedication and a universally inclusive view. One writer has remarked:

The only person able to deal conclusively with [the link between Buddhism and Christianity] must not only be fluent in Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew, etc., but he must also have a personality that will charm and persuade "the prejudiced and the indifferent." Unlike many linguists we know, will he enter into original and highly controversial work? Will he possess the stamina to sustain a great enterprise? To the first miracle, a second miracle must be added.

—J. D. M. Derrett, *The Bible and the Buddhists*

While I hardly claim to be the exemplary scholar that Derrett describes, I note that publishing professors of Christian studies are quite the opposite—they tend to be super-specialized, masters in a narrow subfield. Very few of them venture to even glance at parallel traditions such as Mandaeism, Samaritanism, or Talmudic Judaism. Those who teach in confessional colleges (in the Bible Belt and elsewhere) are even more insular, scarcely acknowledging the existence of important Gnostic materials (e.g. the Nag Hammadi finds) or of any text that is not actually printed in the Holy Bible.

This investigation into Christian origins casts a far wider net. I believe that we must see Christianity for what it is: a human phenomenon rooted in the universal quest for understanding. As such, Christianity is an expression of the eternal search: "Seek and ye shall find." That search is related to Buddhism—and, before that, to Shamanism. The search will always be with us. It can never go away, because the quest for understanding of man's condition is nothing less than the vital essence of what it means to be human. The Gnostics knew this, the Buddhists know this, and the primordial shamans also knew this. Deep down, we all know this.—R.S.

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Seeking information regarding the founder of Christianity, the religious texts we have thus far examined in this series of posts have come from extremely disparate traditions. I list them here in general chronological order:

- the New Testament (II CE)
- the Church Fathers (II-V CE)
- Talmudic Judaism (3rd-6th cent. CE)
- medieval Judaism (XII CE)
- medieval Samaritan writings (XIV CE)

Of the above-listed texts, the most useful have been those from Talmudic Judaism. In numerous passages the Rabbis refer caustically, irreverently, and angrily to an apostate figure who obviously discommoded them greatly. Given the already-emerged movement called Christianity, the Talmud is extremely cautious in its treatment of Yeshu, often resorting to euphemisms (Balam, Ben Stada) and repeated censorship through history. Over a century ago R. Travers Herford examined these writings and compiled what they can tell us about Yeshu—and it is a good deal (for a synopsis, see [NazarethGate](#)

419 ff). We learn that Yeshu was a Pharisee linked to the Jewish government, an important person who fled to Egypt in the entourage of Joshua b. Perachiah, a figure who then successfully preached in Israel, who was tried by the full Sanhedrin, and finally executed. Parallels with the Christian gospel story are inescapable.

Nevertheless, the above listed texts are hardly sufficient to reconstruct a reliable account of the founder of Christianity. For if the figure we are investigating lived in the early part of the first century BCE, then he died (c. 66 BCE) *a full two centuries before the earliest writings about him*, namely, the Christian gospels (which I date to the decade 140–150 CE). The Christian gospels, in fact, do not even write about *him*—they write about a colossal, invented superhero called Jesus of Nazareth!

## **The Dead Sea Scrolls to the rescue**

Thankfully, and quite miraculously, a whole ancient Jewish library was discovered in the 1940s that amply supplements the meagre clues noted above. Scholars of Christianity, naturally, have not consulted the DSS for clues regarding Jesus. For them, the library from the caves of Qumran predates Jesus and is thus *a priori* off the table as evidence relating to the Christian founder. (An exception is Robert Eisenman, who dates the DSS a century too late.)

The foregoing chronological problem, however, is completely removed once we acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth is a fiction and that the true founder of Christianity lived several generations earlier. In fact, *Yeshu ha-Notsri* was *contemporary with the writing of most of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. He was active in Palestine during the reign of Salome Alexandra, that is, after he returned to Israel following the death of Alexander Jannaeus (76 BCE). As it happens, Yeshu's short ministry falls precisely in the period when the bulk of the DSS were written:

[A] few texts from Cave 4 actually refer to historical individuals by name. These references, though isolated, are of enormous importance... All of these individuals and events fall within the first century BCE...

...The Annalistic Calendar (4Q322-324b) seems clearly to refer only to events in the first half of I BCE... The prominence of the period 76-63 BCE has not escaped the notice of adherents of the Standard Model...

[The Commentary on Nahum] fits very well into this watershed era. Its author considers the activity of the Lion of Wrath to be past, while the 'dominion of the Flattery-Seekers' is a tragic reality at the time he is writing. Since, as we have seen, the Lion was Alexander [Janneus], the writer must be living in the period after Alexander's death in the year 76 BCE. –Wise et al, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1996:14, 29 & 30)

Of the eighteen historical individuals named in the DSS, all fall in the mid-first century BCE range (Wise *et al* 14). These were precisely the decades *during and following* the ministry of Yeshu in Israel.

Now, for the big question: Was there a link between the ministry of Yeshu and the writing of the Dead Sea Scrolls? The answer is *affirmative*. There certainly was a link, as I will show in subsequent posts in this series. In fact, the DSS have more to say about Yeshu than all other sources combined. This owes to three principal reasons:

(1) The quantity of DSS material is enormous. The library exceeds the New Testament in length and encompasses well over one hundred new works.

(2) Internal evidence shows that the people who wrote the DSS interacted *extensively* with the followers of Yeshu and possibly also with Yeshu himself. (I will show this in later posts.)

(3) The DSS are not from two hundred years later, or five centuries later, or even fifteen centuries later—they are contemporary with the events of Yeshu's career and his immediate followers. Thus, the DSS are a treasure trove for the investigator of Christian origins and are a virtually *ideal* source regarding contemporary events.

Now, before we get too excited, a couple of caveats are in order... First of all, Yeshu was not the Teacher of Righteousness. Nor did he found the Dead Sea Sect. As a matter of fact, we shall see that Yeshu was a competitor of the Sect—indeed, it considered him a particularly venomous rival.

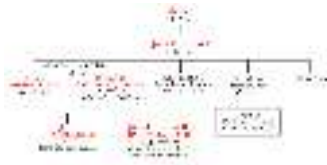
Secondly, as with the Talmud, the Jewish Dead Sea Scrolls are replete with euphemisms and hidden code. Nowhere do these works write explicitly 'This man is Yeshu', 'That man is Janneus', 'This man is Pompey' etc. With rare exceptions, the reader has to tease the historical referents out of these works. Mainline scholarship has reached a consensus on the identity of many figures in the DSS. However, nobody until now has suggested that Yeshu ha-Notsri was one of them. I do so here, and I maintain that Yeshu is not only referenced in the DSS, but that he was a significant figure in those writings.

### **“The Man of the Lie”**

Specialists are agreed that the Commentary on Habakkuk is one of the most valuable texts among the DSS when it comes to historical information. In one revealing passage, the Commentary notes:

“How can you look on silently, you traitors, when the wicked destroys one more righteous than he?” This refers to the family of Absalom and the members of their party, who kept quiet when the Teacher of Righteousness was rebuked, and they did not help him against the Man of the Lie, who had rejected the Law in the presence of their entire company. (1QHab Col. V.8-11)

This passage from the Habakkuk Peshar probably reads as gobbledygook to those who have not studied the scrolls. Described is a confrontation between the Teacher of Righteousness (TR) and a certain Man of the Lie. The TR is publicly rebuked, apparently by the Man of the Lie himself. Meanwhile, “the family of Absalom and the members of their party” keep quiet. What does all this mean?



We see from the chart above that an Absalom was one of the five sons of John Hyrcanus I. Michael Wise et al were the first to link this Absalom with the passage in question:

The reference to the “family of Absalom”... has puzzled scholars for decades. Is “Absalom” another code name or a real historical figure? The biblical Absalom was a son of King David who revolted against his father’s rule. But there was also an Israelite nobleman named Absalom in the first century BCE who was the uncle... of Aristobulus II... It is possible that he is the one the text refers to. (Wise et al 1996:118)

As we concluded in the preceding post, the father of Yeshu was probably one of the five sons of John Hyrcanus I. This passage from the Habakkuk Peshar is telling us that the “family of Absalom and the members of their party” stood by while the TR was publicly rebuked. Furthermore, it seems to imply that the Man of the Lie himself did the rebuking. Now, we know that Yeshu was actively preaching in Palestine *at this very time*. Furthermore, we know that Yeshu was related by blood to the government (*malkuth*) and probably the son of one of Hyrcanus’ five children.

The pieces to the puzzle are finally coming together... The logical inferences from this passage and from what we already know about Yeshu are (a) that the Man of the Lie was a member of the “family of Absalom”; (b) that the Man of the Lie was probably Yeshu, the son of the (Hasmonean) Absalom charted above; and (c) that the “members of their party”—that is, of the party of the Man of the Lie and family of Absalom—are followers of Yeshu.

The political dynamics around the above confrontation now also gain in clarity... The ministry of Yeshu took place during the reign of Salome Alexandra, which was a time of Pharisaic hegemony and a

time of extreme animosity between Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees had always maintained the upper hand, but for the first time in history they were in full retreat. As a person who had been raised a Pharisee, and as the son of Absalom (who sided with the Pharisees), Yeshu would have been able to rebuke the Teacher of Righteousness with impunity during the reign of Salome Alexandra. We can appreciate, then, that Yeshu was by blood and upbringing on the other side of the divide from the Teacher of Righteousness who, as we know from the DSS, was a refugee Sadducee priest, one who was ultra-protective of the priesthood and of its prerogatives.

I consider the above DSS passage decisive as regards the paternity of Yeshu. In my view, Absalom the son of John Hyrcanus was almost certainly the blood link between Yeshu and the ruling Hasmonean family. This would make Yeshu the grandson of the High Priest John Hyrcanus I and also the nephew of two other High Priests: Aristobulus I and Alexander Janneus. At the same time, Salome was the aunt-in-law of Yeshu—in his case, it was a close but not direct relationship to contemporary royalty.

Looking at the chart above, we can also appreciate that Janneus and Absalom were on opposite sides of the Sadducee-Pharisee divide. This intra-family rivalry explains why Yeshu fled during the reign of his uncle, Alexander Janneus. And let us not think for a moment that the Hasmonean family was above killing its own relatives—they were constantly killing one another! (Aristobulus I, for example, killed his own mother as well as his brother Antigonus I.) As for Absalom, the father of Yeshu, he probably went into hiding during the reign of Janneus—or was killed by Janneus, perhaps even during the mass crucifixion of c. 88 BCE.

We also learn from the above citation that (brace yourself) Yeshu ha-Notsri was known to the DSS community as the “Man of the Lie”!

To me, all this makes complete sense. We have seen that Yeshu had become a gnostic. He was a lapsed Pharisee who embraced Buddhism while in Egyptian exile. At the same time, the Teacher of Righteousness was an ultra-Jewish Sadducee, a priest who took the prescriptions of Judaism to the nth degree. These two mighty religious figures were coming from diametrically opposed belief systems. Yeshu had renounced the entire Mosaic Covenant, the narrative of the Chosen People, all the baggage of the Patriarchal Narrative, and even Yahweh himself. The Teacher of Righteousness, on the other hand, upheld these with a vengeance. It is no wonder, then, that in the Sadducean Dead Sea Scrolls Yeshu is referred to as "the Man of the Lie." Furthermore, we will learn that this Man of the Lie not only rebuked the theology of the Dead Sea Sect, but that he was also successful in pulling followers away from Qumran. In other words, the antagonism was on multiple levels: it was not simply theoretical, but manifested also on the practical level at a critical time, that is, just as the Qumran sect was in the process of formation.

The Man of the Lie figures prominently, and always negatively, in the Dead Sea Scriptures. My view is that he is none other than the founder of Christianity.

## Part 7

### The founder: Who was he?

*Christian origins, Josephus*

Note: This post was substantially revised on 10/23/20 after its initial publication (on 8/29/2020). I incorporate new material that more correctly describes the family ties of Yeshu ha-Notsri ( = Jonathan, son of Absalom the Hasmonean).—RS

Just a couple of hours ago, while researching another post that was actually scheduled for publication today (but is now forthcoming), I read a few words in the writings of Josephus that have apparently been overlooked heretofore, words that have a momentous bearing on our investigations into the founder of Christianity. The matter has to do with relations among the Hasmonean royal family, as well as with the parentage of Yeshu.

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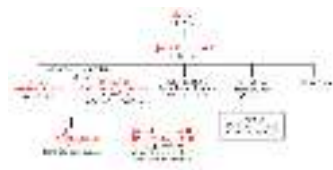
Josephus writes in his *Wars of the Jews*:

[Pompey, upon taking Jerusalem] reinstated Hyrcanus [II] as High Priest, in return for his enthusiastic support shown during the siege, particularly in detaching from Aristobulus [II] large numbers of the rural population who were anxious to join his standard... Among the prisoners was the father-in-law of Aristobulus, who was also his uncle. (War 1.154)

On the face of it, this is a fairly plain passage. The year is 63 BCE. The Roman general Pompey has invaded Palestine and put an end to the bloody civil war between the brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, both sons of the late King Alexander Janneus. In laying siege to Jerusalem, Pompey received “enthusiastic” assistance from Hyrcanus. We elsewhere learn from Josephus that Aristobulus resisted the

Romans, barricaded himself and his last supporters in the Jerusalem temple compound, but gave himself up in an effort to sue for peace, was taken prisoner, and that the supporters of Aristobulus continued to fight on to the end and were massacred.

Of interest to us at this time, however, is the last sentence of the above citation: "Among the prisoners was the father-in-law of Aristobulus, who was also his uncle."



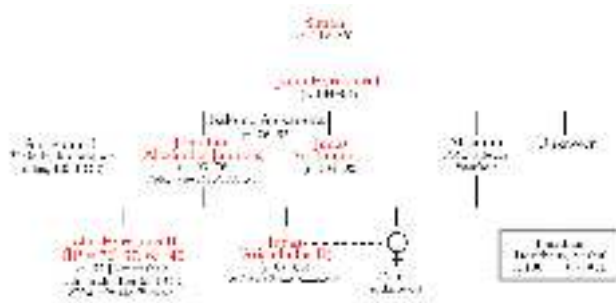
We may ask: Who was this "father-in-law" and "uncle" of Aristobulus? Examination of the above chart shows that Aristobulus II's father was Alexander Jannaeus, and that he had four uncles. The eldest, Aristobulus I, died as king and High Priest in 103 BCE. Antigonus I was assassinated by Aristobulus I, also in 103 BCE. This leaves only Absalom (whom we have identified as the father of Yeshu ha-Notsri) and a certain unnamed uncle who is quite unknown to history. (Josephus merely informs us that he was of a "retiring nature.")

The matter is settled when we read the parallel passage in the Antiquities:

Absalom, who was at once both uncle and father-in-law to Aristobulus [II], was taken captive [by the Romans with the aid of Hyrcanus II]. (Ant 14.71)

Thus, we learn here that Absalom was the father-in-law and the uncle of Aristobulus II. Now, "uncle" is completely to be expected... But "father-in-law"?! What does this mean?

Does it not signify that Aristobulus II married the daughter of Absalom? Of course, this is the only possible explanation for what, in a few words, Josephus casually tells the reader.



## Implications for Yeshu

We can now detail the relationship of Yeshu to the ruling Hasmonean family. First of all, Yeshu's sister (name unknown) was married to a potential future king: Aristobulus II. Second, Yeshu had two *uncles* (Aristobulus I, Alexander Jannaeus) who had reigned over Israel both as king and High Priest. Third, both those uncles had been married in turn to Salome Alexandra, who after their deaths reigned as queen during Yeshu's career of preaching during the 70s and 60s BCE.

Thus, Yeshu had multiple and powerful connections to Israel's ruling Hasmonean family. Despite his excommunication by Perachiah, Yeshu would have very powerful support in Israel.

Finally, the above citations of Josephus inform us that Absalom was taken prisoner by the Romans in 63 BCE. This tells us that the son, Yeshu, in all likelihood *predeceased* his father. After all, we have postulated that Yeshu died by execution of the Sanhedrin c. 66 BCE. Absalom, his father, was still alive three years later. Thus, the order of deaths would be: Queen Salome Alexandra (67 BCE); Yeshu ha-Notsri (c. 66 BCE?); Absalom (sometime after 63 BCE).

We will look in the next post at why Yeshu, in fact, did not return to Jerusalem but went instead to Samaria. After all, he had been excommunicated by the most powerful Pharisee in the land, Joshua ben Perachiah, and Yeshu now had many enemies among the Pharisees. Despite his enviable connections to the government, his position in that tumultuous age was still tenuous. Nevertheless, he may have had a trump card—it is possible that Queen Salome Alexandra herself became one of his followers:

**Jesus said: "Two will rest upon a bed; one will die, the other live."**

**Salome said: "Who are you, man, whose son? You have mounted my bed and eaten from my table."**

**Jesus said to her: "I am he who comes forth from the one who is equal; I was given of the things of my Father."**

**[Salome said:] "I am your disciple."**

([Gospel of Thomas 61](#), Blatz translation)

## Part 8

### The DSS, Yeshu, and Samaria

*Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

In the previous post I identified Yeshu ha-Notrsi—whom I consider to have been the founder of Christianity—as a significant figure written about in the Dead Sea Scrolls: “the Man of the Lie.” Once this identification is made, it becomes possible to investigate the ministry and death of Yeshu via the DSS.

I have already noted that Yeshu, on his return from Egyptian exile shortly after the death of Aexander Janneus in 76 BCE, probably went to Samaria. This suspicion was initially based on evidence from Samaritan sources. They, however, are very late (dating to the Middle Ages). Welcome confirmation of a period of Yeshu’s activity in Samaria is now also to be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

(a) “Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards.” [Micah 1:6] **This refers to the Spreader of Lies, who will mislead the simple-hearted.** (1QpMic 8.3-5)

Here, the “Spreader of Lies” (Heb. *matif ha-kezev*) is simply a variation of the more common epithet “Man of the Lie” (*ish ha-kezev*) encountered in the DSS. The author of the Micah Peshet associates the Spreader of Lies with Samaria and, furthermore, he tells us that the Spreader of Lies misleads “the simple-hearted.” We thus infer that this Spreader of Lies was active in Samaria, and also that the Dead Sea Sect considered his teaching reprehensible.

We also learn from the foregoing citation that the Dead Sea Scrolls writer referred to the followers of the Man of the Lie/Spreader of Lies as “the simple-hearted.” Such a characterization is understandable. After all, the DSS represent the views of a priestly sect for which the

finer points of the Mosaic Law were precious (cf. the lengthy Temple Scroll, possibly authored by the Teacher of Righteousness himself). It is not surprising that such ultra-correct sticklers for the Law considered gnostic-Buddhist supporters of Yeshu (who did away with the Law entirely) as little more than naive dupes. The term “simple-hearted” also occurs elsewhere in the scrolls. I propose that it is a favorite way in which the Dead Sea Sect referred to the followers of Yeshu ha-Notsri.

All this recalls the many acrid interactions depicted in the Christian gospels between Jesus and “Pharisees and scribes.” Tradition views those as interactions between Jesus and hostile elements of the Pharisaic establishment—generally taking place in the Galilee. Indeed, the gospels themselves conceive of those religious conflicts in such a way. But Pharisees were not yet in the Galilee at the turn of the era (they went up north only after the fall of the temple c. 70 CE). The Christian gospels have evidently transposed an earlier conflict between Yeshu ha-Notsri and members of the Dead Sea Sect, “Essenes.” These Essenes were found by the Dead Sea (Pliny) and also in other places of Judea (Josephus), including Jerusalem.

The foregoing explanation explodes another popular myth regarding Jesus: that he was an Essene. Quite the contrary: Jesus/Yeshu was inveterately opposed to the Essenes and, in fact, was successful in drawing disciples away from the Dead Sea Sect. Yeshu is best viewed as an independent preacher, one with unique and significant government connections who was, truth be told, a mortal enemy of the Essenes. For them, he was “the Man of the Lie.”

(b) The interpretation concerns those who lead Ephraim astray, who by their false teaching and their lying tongue and lip of deceit will lead many astray, kings, princes, priests, and people together with the resident alien. Cities and families will perish through their counsel, nobles and rulers will fall because of what they say. (4QpNahum 3-4.ii)

The interpretation of this passage now becomes fairly straightforward. “Those who lead Ephraim astray” are Yeshu and his followers, active in

Samaria (“Ephraim”), which for the DSS writer is a region of “false teaching... lying tongue... lip of deceit...” This passage must have been written after Yeshu had achieved some success in Samaria—c. 70 BCE. This date in turn furnishes a provisional *terminus post quem* for the composition of the Peshet Nahum.

Scholars have interpreted the “[K]ings, princes, priests, and people” who are led astray as a reference to the ancient conquest by Assyria in the eighth century (Wise et al 218). This is forced and quite unlikely. Such a remote allusion would make little sense, for the passage also says that the “Cities and families will perish *through their counsel...* because of what *they say.*” These words reveal to us that no external attack is being described. We are dealing here with a contemporary internal corruption in Samaria, one resulting from religious “counsel” and what “they say.” This has nothing to do with Assyria.

To properly interpret the passage, we must look at the immediately preceding sentences:

(c) Its interpretation concerns the rule of the Seekers-after-Smooth Things, when there shall not depart from the midst of their congregation the Gentile sword, captivity, and plunder, and heated strife among themselves, and exile from fear of the enemy, and a multitude of guilty corpses shall fall in their days, and there shall be no end to the total of their slain, and furthermore, in their body of flesh they shall stumble over their own guilty counsel. (4QpNahum 3-4.ii.4-6)

Again we encounter “*their [guilty] counsel*”—a reference to followers of Yeshu. However, we now also are furnished clear evidence of a contemporary or future military attack: “the Gentile sword, captivity, and plunder...”, “a multitude of... corpses”, “no end to the total of their slain...” That attack is doubtless the Roman conquest of the land under Pompey in 63 BCE. Putting this information together with that given above, we can adjust the *terminus post quem* of the Peshet Nahum to

not merely post-70 BCE, but post-63 BCE when the Roman legions devastated the land.

As for the identity of the “Seekers-after-Smooth-Things” (translated by Wise *et al* as “Flattery-Seekers”), they are not merely the Pharisees (as is generally acknowledged) but also include the followers of Yeshu in Samaria. Basically, the Seekers-after-Smooth-Things are all those who do not follow the Rule of the Community—i.e., all *outsiders*. The DSS also occasionally use the epithets “Men of Mockery” and “Scoffer(s).” All these designations are closely related, though not identical in meaning. Sometimes they refer to Pharisees, sometimes to the followers of Yeshu, and sometimes to both groups—even including gentiles. According to the theology of the scrolls, they generally refer to outsiders who are not among the “elect” of God and who will be eternally damned in the last days.

On the other hand, the more specific designations for the followers of Yeshu in the scrolls are the “simple-minded of Ephraim,” the “men of the lie,” and the “traitors”—this last designation referring specifically to members of the Dead Sea Sect who went over to Yeshu.

## Part 9

# The ministry of Yeshu

*Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

For our purposes, the witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls must be considered much more valuable than either the Talmud or Samaritan writings, for the DSS were written within a generation or two of the events that they describe. The sectarian DSS writings (especially the Pesharim) describe contemporary events of interest to the Yachad, including political developments, the founding of their community (Damascus Document), difficult relations with the Jerusalem priesthood (MMT, etc), and the activity of the renegade preacher Yeshu/Jonathan in Samaria. These all occurred in the first half of the first century BCE:

Finally, a few texts from Cave 4 actually refer to historical individuals by name. These references, though isolated, are of enormous importance, as will be seen below. For now, it is enough to state that the individuals so named are the Syrian king Demetrius Eukairos (who reigned 95-78 BCE), King Alexander Janneus of Israel (103-76), Queen Salome Alexandra of Israel (76-67), King John Hyrcanus II (63-40), and the Roman general Aemilius Scaurus (active in Israel 64-63). In addition, the Commentary on Habbakkuk makes a transparent reference to the Roman invasion of Israel in 63 BCE. (Wise et al, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* 1999:14).

The paleographical dates and historical contents of the DSS suggest that the first century BCE was the formative period for the community described in these writings. The many Qumran texts found in different caves produced by one scribe suggest that the collection belonged to the same community... These data show that the greatest period of scribal activity at Qumran took place in the late Hasmonean and the early Herodian periods. It also reveals that the formative years of the Qumran community should be situated between approximately 76 BCE to ca. 51 BCE. (K. Atkinson, *The Hasmoneans and Their Neighbors*, 2018:13, 109)

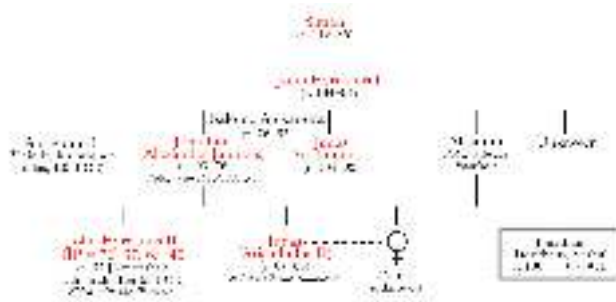
This is enormously relevant. 76 BCE was probably the year in which Yeshu returned to Israel (actually, to Ephraim/Samaria) and began to preach. Yeshu/Jonathan was also probably executed c. 66 BCE. Thus, Yeshu's prophetic activity and death fall squarely in "the formative years of the Qumran community." In other words, *the ministry of Yeshu was contemporary with the founding of the Qumran community.*

However, the facile conclusion that the Teacher of Righteousness = Yeshu is not permitted. Yeshu was the younger of the two by a generation. It is clear from the DSS that these two major figures were enemies. Not only that, but the DSS reveal that they competed for many of the same disciples (cf. John the Baptist and Jesus, Jn 1:35 f). Furthermore, the two figures had very different visions of religion and of truth. The Teacher of Righteousness was a hyper-Jewish adherent of the Mosaic Law. He was emphatically a reformer of *Judaism* and, as such, was very much opposed to 'outsiders' whom he and his followers characterized primarily as 'Seekers of Smooth Things' and heretics ("men of the lie", "simple-minded") who would perish before the power of Yahweh at the Last Judgment.

Yeshu ha-Notsri (or, if you prefer, 'Jonathan son of Absalom'), on the other hand, was a learned, highly-placed, renegade Pharisee, now a gnostic-Buddhist, one who definitely rejected the Mosaic tradition of his heritage. Because he was active at the same time as the Teacher of Righteousness, and because Yeshu took followers away from the Dead Sea Sect, it is easy to understand that those of Qumran would view Yeshu not only as an influential competitor, but also as 'the Man of the Lie' and 'he who moves the boundary-markers.' In fact, when we understand the language used, we will see that the Dead Sea Scrolls have a good deal to say about Yeshu—a figure whom they invariably hold in a negative light—and about his followers, the "simple-minded of Ephraim."

We are now in the decade of the 70s BCE. The following events occur at this time:

- 76 BCE - The anti-Pharisee King Alexander Janneus dies; his pro-Pharisee wife, Queen Salome Alexandra, assumes the throne of Israel
- c. 75 BCE - Yeshu ha-Notsri (= Jonathan, son of the Hasmonean Absalom) returns from exile in Egypt; he begins to preach in Samaria
- c. 75 BCE - The Qumran community begins to form (see above discussion)



- c. 70 BCE - Yeshu is preaching in and around Samaria. His anti-Jewish rhetoric and teachings are temporarily tolerated for two principal reasons: (a) he has powerful connections with the Hasmonean royal family (his sister was married to Queen Salome’s son, Aristobulus II; and also two of Yeshu’s uncles were the queen’s husbands); and (b) the queen herself appears to have come under Yeshu’s spell (cf. GTh 61, “I am your disciple”). There is a give-and-take between disciples of Yeshu and the Yachad, as some disciples go to Yeshu from Qumran and from other ‘Essene’ camps (they are termed “traitors” in the DSS), and some go in the other direction.

Several passages in the DSS seem to refer to this period of Yeshu’s activity:

It’s interpretation concerns the Man of Lies who has led many astray with words of falsehood, for they chose worthless things and did not

listen to the Mediator of Knowledge so that they will perish by the sword and by hunger and by plague. (4Q171)

Here, the “Man of Lies” is Yeshu ha-Notsri. The “Mediator of Knowledge” is the Teacher of Righteousness and his appointed interpreters [*malitz* = Mediator/Interpreter in the DSS and in the foregoing passage].

Its interpretation concerns the Man of Lies who... against the Elect of God... behaves with presumptuous arrogance. (4Q171)

Again, the “Man of Lies” refers to Yeshu ha-Notsri, and the “Elect of God” refers to the Yachad, the Essenes of Qumran and elsewhere. In a different tradition, namely Samaritan records, the renegade prophet (there called Dositheus = Jonathan) also acts with presumptuous arrogance, for he rewrites the Torah, makes himself God, and takes the place of the lawgiver Moses.

This refers to the Spreader of Lies who deceived many, building a worthless city by bloodshed and forming a community by lies for his own glory... They blasphemed and reviled God’s chosen ones... This means that when they repent... true knowledge will be revealed to them, as water of the sea for abundance. (1QpHab)

Again, the “Spreader of Lies” is Yeshu, and “God’s chosen ones” are the Yachad of Qumran. Those who “repent” are the followers of Yeshu—the Nasarenes—who subsequently convert to the Dead Sea Sect.

## Part 10

### Family ties

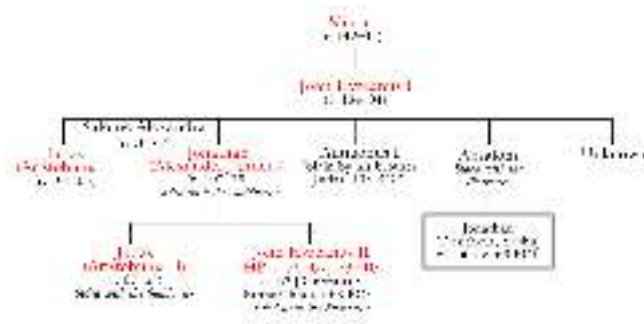
*Christian origins, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

As noted in [an earlier post](#), John or Jonathan was probably the actual name by which the Christian founder was known in his lifetime.

Jonathan means “Yahweh Gives” (cf. Gk. Dositheus, “Gift of God”).

Later Jewish records (the Talmud) refer to the Christian founder as Yeshu ha-Notsri, “Preserver of Salvation,” reflecting latter-day Christian developments of the name “Jesus” (→ Yeshu) and “Nazarene” (→ Notsri).

John was a favorite name among the Hasmoneans. John, the person with whom we are concerned and the founder of the religion that eventually became Christianity, was the son of a Hasmonean known to history by the name of Absalom—the brother of Alexander Janneus (who was also known as “Jonathan”). Thus, John/Yeshu was a nephew of King Janneus. One might assume this close relationship conferred protection upon the lad, but that assumption would be wrong. The Hasmonean family was notoriously fractious, some members favoring the Sadducees (Janneus, John Hyrcanus I and II), and some favoring their bitter enemies the Pharisees (Salome Alexandra, Absalom). Among the Hasmoneans, brother routinely killed brother or even parent (cf. Aristobulus I) if they were impediments to accessing the throne.



Absalom sided with the Pharisees while his brother Janneus sided with the Sadducees, and open warfare existed between the two sides. Thus it is that the young Pharisee John/Yeshu, son of Absalom, fled to Egypt ca. 88 BCE when his uncle Janneus instigated a pogrom against the Pharisees. Yeshu (I will continue to call him by that name for simplicity) returned to Israel upon the death of Janneus in 76 BCE, at which time the Pharisee-friendly widow of Janneus, Salome Alexandra (Yeshu's aunt by marriage) became queen.

Yeshu's sister was also married to the queen's son, Aristobulus II. Thus, upon his return to Palestine from exile in Egypt, Yeshu had multiple very close connections to royalty.

Like his father, Yeshu was also a Pharisee. We know from historical and religious records that Salome favored the Pharisees. Indeed, her brother, Simon ben Shetach, was the leader of the Pharisaic faction and the heir to Joshua ben Perachiah as nasi (head of the Sanhedrin). All these links mean that Jonathan/Yeshu had entrée to the royal household itself and to the highest level of Pharisaic and royal power.

It is obvious, then, that the eventual execution of Yeshu at the hands of the Pharisaic religious faction was no light matter. They were not only executing one of their own, but were executing a person with the highest royal connections. They were also executing this gnostic and quasi-Buddhist on *religious* grounds: apostasy, blasphemy, and leading the people astray (thus the Talmud). Of course, Yeshu merited a full pro forma religious trial before the Sanhedrin, with a waiting

period of forty days for witnesses to come forward, and so on. Yeshu's final judge was doubtless the queen's brother, ben Shetach. In sum, *the founder of Christianity was put to death for religious reasons by his own family and by his own people.* In that unprecedented confluence of circumstances we detect some of the pathos of Christianity's beginnings.

However, the pathos also extended to those related to Yeshu—including Salome. Evidence from multiple sources suggests that she herself was his disciple. If the Salome named in the Gospel of Thomas is the Queen Salome we have been discussing, then she is explicitly made to state "I am your disciple" (GTh 61). Also, in the Toldoth Yeshu (an ancient Jewish history of Jesus), Queen Alexandra ("Helena") is personally impressed with Yeshu and, at one point, thus interrogates him:

**Jesus said: Lady, I am he, and I raise the dead.**

**In the same hour the queen was affrighted and said: That is a great sign.**

**Apostates still joined themselves to [Yeshu], were with him, and there arose a great schism in Israel.**

A great schism, indeed. The personal situation of Queen Helena/Salome would also be quite pathetic as regards Yeshu, for it was her *brother* who may have sentenced her own religious mentor to death. Salome was apparently in the middle between the two, and who can fathom the acute pathos and helplessness of her position when forced to yield to the stern opposition of the entire Pharisaic establishment?

Mention can also be made of Mk 15:40:

**There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome who, when he was in Galilee, followed him...**

This discussion only begins to unravel the complexities and unique story of Yeshu—a man very well educated religiously, a pacifist-

Buddhist, and also a man well-placed politically and socially in Israel, one who put all aside, struck out on his own courageous road of truth, and in so doing changed the face of history.

Yeshu, by the way, was not the first person in history to go down such a radical path. He had a great model: the Buddha. Gautama Siddhartha, five hundred years earlier, was similarly born into royalty. To the shock of his father the king, and of his wife and child, Gautama renounced all and became a wandering beggar in the sole search of truth. As far as we know, Gautama was the first person in history to do so—and to succeed. He founded Buddhism. Yeshu was the second person in history to succeed. He founded Christianity.

Though the details of his life have until now been obscured, the essence of Yeshu's teachings have long been known. The New Testament is studded with them, astonishing parables and sayings that genuinely go back to the founder himself. Those teachings were too precious to jettison along with his biography, and so the evangelists selectively preserved a number of them—those that were compatible with their invented god-man Jesus of Nazareth. Other authentic teachings can be found in the Gospel of Thomas and the **Gospel of Barnabas**.

## Part 11

### Family ties (cont.)

*Christian origins, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

#### The name—again

In the immediately preceding post we saw that a certain Jonathan was the founder of Christianity. The Jewish rabbis who penned the Talmud several centuries later dubbed him “Yeshu ha-Notsri” (< Gk. *Iesou Nazarene*, “Jesus the Nazarene”). They did so under the influence of the Christian gospels that had by the fourth century CE become well-known. The Christian evangelists, however, knew better. Through a series of permutations that need not concern us here, they demoted the figure Jonathan (“Yahweh Gives”) to a secondary prophet, John the Baptist. The Mandaeans, however, preserved the name Jonathan/John for their founding prophet. The Mandaeans also retained the original sense of the word *Natsarene* (< *natsar*, “preserve, keep secret”) and called their spiritual teachers *Natsuriiia* (“keepers of secret gnosis”). They also, of course, retained the gnostic sense of the founder’s teaching—which was ultimately Buddhist, **as we have now seen**.

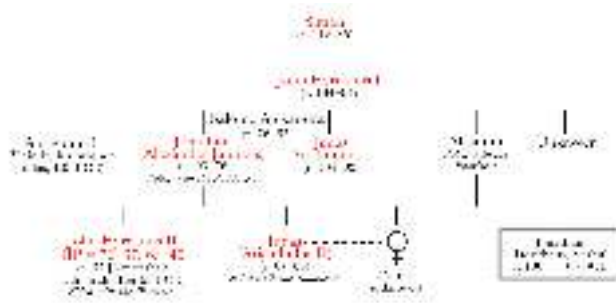
History records that the Samaritans had an arch-heretic—also dated by Shahaarastani and others to the century before the common era—by the name of Dositheus, which is also a **permutation of Jonathan** (both names meaning “God Gives”). The Samaritans would reject the gnostic Dositheus as vehemently as the Christians would reject the Buddhism of Yeshu. In both cases reactionary religions evolved from which the original gnostic essence was ejected and replaced by faith. The trajectory gnosis → faith is historically universal, for priesthoods (once

constituted) require the faith of adherents to survive and thrive, while gnosis—though it leads to *individual* salvation (which is, after all, the only salvation that counts)—is an internal, granular, anti-corporate, and entirely destructive force to any church.

	<u>Authentic</u>	<u>Corporate</u>
Buddhism	The Buddha (lay, gnostic)	Brahmins (priestly)
DSS	Man of the Lie (gnostic)	Dead Sea Sect (priestly, Sadducean)
NT	John the Baptist (gnosis = water)	Jesus Christ (creation of Church)
Samaritanism	Dositheus (lay, gnostic)	Normative Samaritanism (priestly)

## The family of Jonathan/Yeshu

A **casual remark** by the ancient Jewish historian Josephus reveals that Yeshu's sister (name unknown) was the daughter-in-law of Queen Salome. She married Aristobulus II, who would become king in 67 BCE, that is, towards the very end of Yeshu's life.



It was after the death of Janneus that **Yeshu returned from his Egyptian exile**. This was either in 76 BCE (the year Janneus died), or shortly thereafter. Clearly, his close relationship to royalty provided Yeshu with extraordinarily powerful protection. We now understand the pregnant Talmudic statement: “for he was connected to royalty” (see [NazarethGate](#) p. 425). This statement was not mere hyperbole. It was meant literally.

In the outrageously corrupt, power-hungry dynamics of Hasmonean succession, anyone related to the crown was suspect in the eyes of everyone else. Thus, when he briefly held power in 103 BCE, Aristobulus I took the opportunity to kill his brother Antigonus I—thus eliminating one possible claimant to the throne. More relevantly, after Yeshu returned to Palestine in the 70s BCE, his two cousins Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II were embroiled in a bitter feud over which one would succeed their mother Salome upon her death.

That feud eventually led to open civil war after the queen died in 67 BCE. But even while she was alive, there would have been suspicious glances cast on this son of Absalom—himself close to the royal family and perhaps also a pretender to power.

The theme of Yeshu’s royalty—or possible *pretensions* to royalty—survives in all four canonical gospels: “Are you the king of the Jews?” asks Pilate of Jesus.

Let us, for a moment, imagine the contemporary situation after Yeshu ha-Notsri had returned to Palestine ca. 75 BCE. The evidence (from the

Talmud, etc.) tells us that Yeshu had great success among the people, preaching a new, very un-Jewish religion. He was excommunicated for apostasy, for inciting the people, for making himself god, etc. Let us put aside for the moment that (as a Buddhist) Yeshu was a very rare bird—a pacifist, one who taught “love your enemies,” one who would never take up the sword, and one who was personally thoroughly harmless.

As I mentioned, let us put all this aside and consider, for a moment, the attitude of his many followers. There surely would have been no paucity of zealots among them, zealots who would have said: “Look, your sister is the Queen’s daughter-in-law. Two of your uncles were king and High Priest. *Make yourself king!*” And furthermore, some would have enthusiastically offered: “*We will help you become king!*” In the Gospel of Mark, Pilate asks: “Then what shall I do with the man *whom you call* the King of the Jews?”

After all, this is only human nature. The authentic facts of history confirm the zealot strain that we find in the gospels: Peter is charged with cutting off the ear of the High Priest’s slave Malchus (Jn 18:10 etc), and one of the apostles is named Simon “the Zealot” (Mt 10:4). The Zealots, of course, would gather power over succeeding generations and would eventually precipitate the great revolt against Rome in 67 CE.

Being a saint, however, Yeshu would have nothing to do with violence. Thus, he not only betrayed his ancestral religion, Judaism, but he also betrayed the most enthusiastic among his followers.

Eventually, Yeshu was defenseless before his many enemies who simply arrested him, put him on trial before the Sanhedrin, and condemned him to die. Even his aunt by marriage, Queen Salome, would not have been able to prevent this—and she, herself, had become one of his disciples.



## Part 12

### Family ties (and a correction)

*Christian origins, Yeshu ha-Notsri*

As you are well aware, this website is a creation in real time. It is technically a blog, a record of my researches from day to day or week to week. It is a process of discovery and you, the reader, witness that process live.

Of course, I don't have fact checkers or an editorial board. Your comments sent to this site or to my email (see "Contact" on the front page) help me correct mistakes, improve the argument, and modify statements or positions—thanks! Such corrections can also be quite fascinating.

And there have been (and will be) mistakes. After all, the process of discovery is not a straight line. It's more like a zigzag or a spiral, with occasional dead ends, backtracks, and false starts. Well, that's typical of scientific exploration in general.

Here I need to correct the record on one very important point: Queen Salome Alexandra did not marry Yeshu's father, Absalom—as I wrote a couple of weeks ago. Yes, it sounded improbable to me, too... But that's what Josephus initially seemed to imply to me in his casual statement:

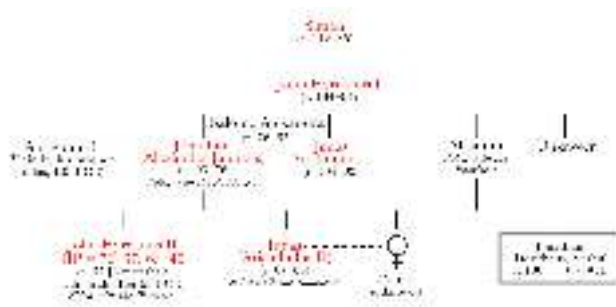
[Pompey, upon taking Jerusalem] reinstated Hyrcanus [II] as High Priest, in return for his enthusiastic support shown during the siege, particularly in detaching from Aristobulus [II] large numbers of the rural population who were anxious to join his standard... Among the prisoners was the father-in-law of Aristobulus, who was also his uncle. (War 1.154)

The parallel passage in *Antiquities of the Jews* (14.71) informs us that this “uncle” of Aristobulus II was named Absalom. He, in fact, is the figure that I identify as the father of Yeshu. Despite checking the Greek of Josephus, I hastily interpreted “father-in-law” as “stepfather.” Of course, there’s a big difference. A father-in-law is the father of one’s *spouse*. A stepfather is one’s non-biological father, that is, a mother’s second (or third, etc) husband. In this case the correction greatly impacts the relationship of Yeshu to the Hasmonean royal family. The details are important, so please keep reading...

If Absalom were the stepfather of Aristobulus II—as I first interpreted Josephus—then Queen Salome Alexandra would have indeed married a third time by levirate, wedding Absalom the father of Yeshu after the death of Alexander Janneus, her second husband. This, in turn, would make Yeshu the stepson of the queen herself.

However, we must now reject that too-venturesome scenario. The correct translation of Josephus’ **νεθρος** [link: top line] is “father-in-law.” This means that Aristobulus II’s *wife* was the daughter of Absalom, who also happened to be Aristobulus’ uncle. It was a marriage between cousins.

So now we know that Jonathan/Yeshu had a sister who, in turn, was married to Aristobulus II, king and High Priest from 67 to 63 BCE. The corrected chart diagramming the relationship of Yeshu to the Hasmonean royal family can now be more correctly set forth:



I have also revised a couple of recent posts ([here](#) and [here](#)) to reflect the above updated information and suggest that readers review those posts, which have substantially changed.

My main argument is not affected: Yeshu ha-Notsri, the founder of Christianity, was *closely* related to the Hasmonean government of Israel—as implied by the Talmudic use of the word *malkuth* (“royalty”) to describe his background (b. Sanh. 43a; cf. *NazarethGate* 425). Indeed, Yeshu’s relationships to royalty were multiple and close:

(1) Yeshu came from a family of High Priests (noted in red font in the above chart). His great-grandfather Simon and his grandfather Hyrcanus I were both High Priests of the Jews. In addition, Yeshu’s uncles Aristobulus I and Alexander Janneus were High Priests in turn.

(2) Yeshu came from a family of kings. Technically, Yeshu’s great-grandfather Simon and his grandfather Hyrcanus I repudiated the title “king,” though they indeed functioned as head of state. Yeshu’s uncle Aristobulus I was the first to assume the title “king” (in 104 BCE), and Yeshu’s uncle Janneus also did so. Finally, Yeshu’s brother-in-law, Aristobulus II, was king from 67 to 63 BCE. (Hyrcanus II served as High Priest during those years.)

As for Queen Salome Alexandra (Jewish name Shalomzion), she was married in turn to two of Yeshu’s uncles. Also—and not to be overlooked—Yeshu’s brother-in-law (his sister’s husband, Aristobulus II) was none other than *Queen Salome’s second son* by Alexander Janneus.

The actual family ties of Yeshu ha-Notsri are now much clearer. He was indeed very close to royalty—as close as one can be without being in the direct line of succession. It is no wonder that the young Yeshu was deemed important enough for the pharisaic leader, Perachiah, to take to Egypt in flight from Yeshu’s bloodthirsty uncle Alexander Janneus. For we see from the above chart that Janneus sided with the

Sadducees (who had held power in Jerusalem for many generations), but that Absalom's side of the family sided with the emergent Pharisees. And, indeed, on a single day Janneus crucified 800 Pharisees while Perachiah and Yeshu were in Egypt.

Though she was married to Janneus, Salome covertly sided with the Pharisees. Her own brother, Simon ben Shetach, was a leading Pharisee. In fact, Shetach took over the title *nasi* (head) from Perachiah during Salome's reign. It was Shetach who probably officiated at the final trial and conviction of Yeshu before the Sanhedrin about 66 BCE.

Upon the death of her second husband Alexander Janneus in 76 BCE, Salome became queen with ultimate political power over the Jews. However, she deferred much of that power to the Pharisees during her reign (76-67 BCE). In the Talmud, the rabbinic descendants of the Pharisees looked back on Salome's reign as their glory days. It was also during her reign that Yeshu preached, mostly in Samaria. And it was towards the end of her reign—or possibly very shortly thereafter—that he was arrested, tried, and executed.

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*Thank you for reading. You now have a new and rather detailed account of the founder of Christianity, one not found anywhere else. This view has been drawn from diverse writings long marginalized and often ignored by Bible scholars, including the the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mandaean scriptures, the Talmud, and Samaritan records. There was indeed a founder of Christianity, a remarkable figure whose story is even more compelling than that of Jesus of Nazareth.*