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## TALMUD SOUNDBITE

### #2

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*"There is not a whore in the world that the Talmudic sage Rabbi Eleazar has not had sex with."*

*(Abodah Zarah 17a)*

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WITH A GUEST APPEARANCE BY JESUS THE NAZARENE

### Context

As in my Talmud Soundbite #1 I again acknowledge that context is key, and with the above claim there is clearly background missing to guide a reader with respect to reaching any reasonable judgement. For example:

- Is this behaviour endorsed as normative for Rabbis?
- Is this behaviour condemned?
- Does it provide guidance for the law codes (Mishneh Torah and Shulchan Aruch) of Rabbi Maimonides and Rabbi Karo?
- Is it historical?
- Is it a morality tale?

The above quote is found frequently on the internet and I believe the main source for it comes from *Judaism Discovered* by Michael Hoffman as the wording matches his "interpretation" word for word as can be seen:

Abodah Zarah 17a states that there is not a whore in the world that the Talmudic sage Rabbi Eleazar has not had sex with.

I will comment below about the interesting wider context this story appears in but for now I will concentrate on this compulsive "Rabbi". The first paragraph reads thus:

#### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 17a:12

**17a:12** The Gemara asks: **And** is it correct that one who repents **of the sin** of forbidden sexual intercourse does **not** die? **But isn't it taught** in a *baraita*: **They said about Rabbi Elazar ben Durdayya that he was so promiscuous that he did not leave one prostitute in the world with whom he did not engage in sexual intercourse.** **Once, he heard that there was one prostitute in one of the cities overseas who would take a purse full of dinars as her payment. He took a purse full of dinars and went and crossed seven rivers to reach her. When they were engaged in the matters to which they were accustomed, a euphemism for intercourse, she passed wind and said: Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdayya will not be accepted in repentance, even if he were to try to repent.**

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.17a.12?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.17a.12?lang=bi)

I will first mention that there are several Talmud sages called Rabbi Eleazar (Elazar), much admired, and the above named "Rabbi" is not to be conflated or confused with them. Secondly, it can be seen that a question, one of a series both before and after this narrative, precedes the accusation. It is clearly a question about the sin of committing "forbidden sexual intercourse" and the repenting of this sin. Thirdly, and without revealing the punchline ahead of time, it will be noted that after introducing Elazar ben Durdayya with the title of "Rabbi", already within this first paragraph he simply becomes plain "Elazar ben Durdayya". At an inopportune moment, the prostitute farts and knowingly mocks Elazar for his dedication to Torah inobservance. His reputation is so bad, even were he to repent, it would not be accepted. The words of the prostitute intensely distress Elazar:

#### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 17a:13,14

**17a:13** This statement deeply shocked Elazar ben Durdayya, and **he went and sat between two mountains and hills and said: Mountains and hills, pray for mercy on my behalf, so that my repentance will be accepted. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed" (Isaiah 54:10). He said: Heaven and earth, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our**

own behalf, as it is stated: "For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment" (Isaiah 51:6).

**17a:14** He said: Sun and moon, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed" (Isaiah 24:23). He said: Stars and constellations, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "And all the hosts of heaven shall mold away" (Isaiah 34:4).

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.17a.13?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.17a.13?lang=bi)

The conscience stricken Elazar ben Durdaiya, in what is obviously not to be taken literally, seeks mercy from unlikely sources, but the subtext is that what might be considered idolatrous pleas (in keeping with the wider context of this chapter's narrative) is met with the implied rebuke that even these unlikely objects of supplication answer that they need to pray for their own mercy. The message is that Elazar is seeking to absolve himself of personal contrition by seeking it via others.

#### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 17a:15

**17a:15** Elazar ben Durdaiya said: Clearly the matter depends on nothing other than myself. He placed his head between his knees and cried loudly until his soul left his body. A Divine Voice emerged and said: Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya is destined for life in the World-to-Come. The Gemara explains the difficulty presented by this story: **And here** Elazar ben Durdaiya **was** guilty of **the sin** of forbidden sexual intercourse, **and yet he died** once he repented. The Gemara answers: **There too, since he was attached so strongly** to the sin, to an extent that transcended the physical temptation he felt, **it is similar to heresy**, as it had become like a form of idol worship for him.

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.17a.15?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.17a.15?lang=bi)

Finally the penny drops and Elazar ben Durdaiya takes responsibility for his own actions, expresses regret for his sin until he dies. Consequently a divine voice declares Elazar is destined for the world to come and bestows upon him the honorary title of "Rabbi." The context of idolatry as the subtext for this story is made clear. How does the narrative make clear the title of "Rabbi" is honorary? The following paragraph makes this clear:

#### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 17a:16

**17a:16** When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi heard this story of Elazar ben Durdaiya, **he wept and said: There is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come only after many years of toil, and there is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come in one moment. And Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi further says: Not only are penitents accepted, but they are even called: Rabbi, as the Divine Voice referred to Elazar ben Durdaiya as Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya.**

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.17a.16?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.17a.16?lang=bi)

It is clear that Elazar ben Durdaiya in this edifying story is not in any formal sense recognised as a Rabbi in any formal sense, and certainly not a "Talmudic sage". He was in fact, in his disreputable behaviour, a nobody, but due to his genuine repentance, in effect on his deathbed, given the creditable title of "Rabbi".

Therefore, and despite some Talmud apologists mistakenly suggesting Elazar was not called a "Rabbi" until the end, the introduction of Elazar as "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya" at the beginning of the tale, is applied retrospectively. In effect, what follows is the explanation for the title, which is demonstrably given in an honorary sense, and does not endorse him as a literal Rabbi. It is recognition for his admission of personal liability.

My reason for this particular soundbite is to genuinely lay the groundwork for what I assert is my sincerity in exploring matters raised about the Talmud's content. There will follow in time a subject that will shock enquiring minds, not least of all with the comprehensive evidence related to it. I remain coy for now about the topic. In the meantime, I thought there may be interest in another issue concerning the Talmud, and that is whether Jesus is mentioned or not. I therefore present the following which Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's translation of the Talmud, and his commentary, show in this specific Abodah Zarah context.

## Jesus the Nazarene

I expect those cognizant with the Bible are aware of the "whoring" metaphor representing idolatry and can therefore perceive the meaning of the story above discussed by the Rabbis. The whole of Abodah Zarah is primarily concerned with idolatry and it is of interest that a character called Jesus the Nazarene appears, or rather a student of his. Jesus the Nazarene's student appears in 27a and there is an indirect and questionable reference in 48a which reads "the house of Natzrefei, a house of idol worship". I will concentrate on the references in Abodah Zarah 17a which is the same folio where the story of Rabbi Elazar appears.

To provide context and reason for the introduction of Jesus the Nazarene into the narrative it requires quoting the last three paragraphs of Abodah Zarah 16b:

### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 16b:15-17

**16b:15** Apropos the above discussion, the Gemara relates incidents involving Sages who were sentenced by the ruling authorities. **The Sages taught: When Rabbi Eliezer was arrested and charged with heresy by the authorities, they brought him up to a tribunal to be judged. A certain judicial officer [hegemon] said to him: Why should an elder like you engage in these frivolous matters of heresy?**

**16b:16** Rabbi Eliezer **said to him: The Judge is trusted by me to rule correctly. That officer thought that Rabbi Eliezer was speaking about him; but in fact he said this only in reference to his Father in Heaven.** Rabbi Eliezer meant that he accepted God's judgment, i.e., if he was charged he must have sinned to God in some manner. The officer **said to him: Since you put your trust in me, you are acquitted [dimos]; you are exempt.**

**16b:17** **When Rabbi Eliezer came home, his students entered to console him for being accused of heresy, which he took as a sign of sin, and he did not accept their words of consolation. Rabbi**

**Akiva said to him: My teacher, allow me to say one matter from all of that which you taught me. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Speak. Rabbi Akiva said to him: My teacher, perhaps some statement of heresy came before you**

**17a:1 and you derived pleasure from it, and because of this you were held responsible by Heaven.**

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.16b.15?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.16b.15?lang=bi)

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz provides background to what is presented as an historical event and introduces why Jesus the Nazarene enters the narrative:

### Background to Avodah Zarah 16b:15-17 by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

#### Rabbi Eliezer was arrested and charged with heresy:

The Romans treated religions they accepted with tolerance. Yet, they did not recognize various sects that they deemed heretical, a category that included Christianity. These were considered forms of superstition and sorcery. This was bolstered by the fact that many heretical sects were mystical in outlook and included sorcerous rites. It is unclear what Rabbi Eliezer did to be accused of heresy, but it is possible that his ascetic lifestyle and the fact that he was isolated from his colleagues to a certain extent (see, e.g., Bava Metzia 59a–b) caused the Romans to be suspicious of him.

**Koren Talmud Bavli – Avodah Zarah · Commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, [Avodah Zarah perek I 16b page 85] (PDF version)**

### THE WILLIAM DAVIDSON/KOREN BAVLI TALMUD – ABODAH ZARAH 17a:1-4

**17a:1 and you derived pleasure from it, and because of this you were held responsible by Heaven. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Akiva, you are right, as you have reminded me that once I was walking in the upper marketplace of Tzippori, and I found a man who was one of the students of Jesus the Nazarene, and his name was Ya'akov of Kefar Sekhanya. He said to me: It is written in your Torah: "You shall not bring the payment to a prostitute, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 23:19). What is the halakha: Is it permitted to make from the payment to a prostitute for services rendered a bathroom for a High Priest in the Temple? And I said nothing to him in response.**

**17a:2 He said to me: Jesus the Nazarene taught me the following:** It is permitted, as derived from the verse: "For of the payment to a prostitute she has gathered them, and to the payment to a prostitute they shall return" (Micah 1:7). Since the coins came from a place of filth, let them go to a place of filth and be used to build a bathroom.

**17a:3 And I derived pleasure from the statement, and due to this, I was arrested for heresy by the authorities, because I transgressed that which is written in the Torah: "Remove your way far from her, and do not come near the entrance of her house" (Proverbs 5:8). "Remove your way far from her," this is a reference to heresy; "and do not come near the entrance of her house," this is a reference to the ruling authority. The Gemara notes: And there are those who say a different interpretation: "Remove your way far from her," this is a reference to heresy and**

**the ruling authority; "and do not come near the entrance of her house," this is a reference to a prostitute. And how much distance must one maintain from a prostitute? Rav Hisda said: Four cubits.**

**17a:4** With regard to the derivation of the verse **by Jesus the Nazarene**, the Gemara asks: **And what do the Sages derive from this phrase: "Payment to a prostitute"?** The Gemara answers: They explain it **in accordance with** the opinion of **Rav Hisda, as Rav Hisda says: Any prostitute who hires herself** out to others for money will become so attached to this practice that **ultimately**, when others no longer wish to hire her, **she will hire** others to engage in intercourse with her. **As it is stated: "And in that you gave payment, and no payment is given to you, therefore you are contrary"** (Ezekiel 16:34).

[https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.16b.15?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.16b.15?lang=bi)

I know there is debate about whether the Christian Jesus is, or is not, mentioned in the Talmud, so I thought it would be of interest to view Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's comments about the appearance Jesus the Nazarene found in this section of the Avodah Zarah:

### Background to Avodah Zarah 17a:1-4 by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

#### Jesus the Nazarene:

In standard versions of the Talmud, this story appears without the name Jesus the Nazarene, which was removed by censors.

A similar incident appears in tractate Sota (47a), where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Peraḥya is depicted as one who pushed aside Jesus the Nazarene with both hands. The Gemara relates that Yehoshua ben Peraḥya was returning to Jerusalem following his flight to Alexandria in Egypt, together with his student, Jesus the Nazarene. When they stopped in an inn and were treated well, Yehoshua ben Peraḥya mentioned to Jesus that the service was good. Jesus responded that the innkeeper was unattractive. This response led Yehoshua ben Peraḥya to ostracize Jesus. Yehoshua ben Peraḥya was unable to bring himself to revoke the ostracism until it was too late and Jesus turned away from traditional Judaism.

It should be noted, however, that the story of Yehoshua ben Peraḥya, who was driven from Jerusalem by the Hasmonean King Alexander Yannai, could not have taken place any later than 76 BCE. Consequently, the reference to Jesus the Nazarene cannot be connected with the individual surrounding whom the Christian faith was established. Many commentaries therefore suggest that all talmudic references to Jesus are referring to another person, as presumably there was more than one person with that name who lived during the time of the Mishna.

**Koren Talmud Bavli – Avodah Zarah · Commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, [Avodah Zarah perek I 16b page 86] (PDF version)**

I have no side to take on this issue concerning whether Jesus (or Mary) is, or is not, mentioned in the Talmud with respect to, were it true, the negative aspects. They are irrelevant to me. I ask a question concerning the Sota 47a story in that would it be impossible for the Talmud to anachronistically insert Jesus into a story set in the past? Other anachronisms are present in the Talmud. I find the idea that "presumably" there was more than one character called "Jesus the Nazarene", who just happened to also be associated with idolatry. I do not know of another "Jesus of Nazareth" mentioned in historical

documents from the same time period, even allowing a century or two, but I am willing to be informed otherwise. Rabbi Steinsaltz however provides a clue to what may have been his personal view when he writes this about the name of the "student" of Jesus the Nazarene:

### Personalities by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

#### Ya'akov of Kefar Sekhanya:

Even if one identifies the Jesus mentioned here with the founder of Christianity, the identity of this student remains unclear. Christian texts mention at least three individuals called Ya'akov who were students, or apostles, of Jesus of Nazareth. Since there they are identified by the names of their fathers, not their place of residence, it is impossible to ascertain which one is the disciple referred to here.

**Koren Talmud Bavli – Avodah Zarah · Commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, [Avodah Zarah perek I 16b page 86] (PDF version)**

## Conclusion

It is clear to me the "Rabbi Elazar" narrative is either deliberately or carelessly quoted out of context by those who desire for whatever motive to concentrate on negative material in the Talmud. I have no problem with only highlighting negative material within polemical exchanges. Some within all the various belief systems do it about other belief systems. My position is simply to explore whether any such claims are true, false, or unproven. It is challenging work however to check and verify every individual claim and I understand time constraints for many make this difficult. I simply say this: There are many lists of Talmud, New Testament, Islamic texts or one liners "proving" they say any number of things. The trap is to verify one claim as being true or false and then fallaciously deciding all the others are therefore true or false. I see it more like a criminal case where someone is accused of a dozen counts of libel. Ordinarily, a verdict would conclude for example, guilty on counts one and seven, and not guilty on all the others. (I would include "not proven" rather than beyond all reasonable doubt).

I included the "Jesus the Nazarene" material as a matter of interest and I may examine all the controversy surrounding Jesus in the Talmud at a later time.

## Sources

**Books:** Jesus in the Talmud by Peter Schäfer

Jesus in the Talmud: His Personality, His Disciples and His Sayings by Bernhard Pick

The Disciples And Followers Of Jesus In The Talmud by G R S Mead

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<http://talmud.faithweb.com/articles/short.html>

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