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Talmudic polemics and incantations in the name of Jesus: Saliva as *materia medica*

By *Dan Jaffé**

Abstract

This article sets out to contribute an important new element to the question of the polemics between the Tannaim and Jewish Christians. The particular focus here is on the use of saliva in conjunction with incantatory healing practices as described in the Talmudic corpus and in the New Testament. It will be demonstrated that certain medical practices, among which those relying on the use of saliva, were forbidden by the Talmud precisely because Jewish Christians associated the name of Jesus with them. We propose to see among these Jewish Christians, the Ebionites or Elcesaites, who made extensive use of water and saliva in their healing rituals.

This article explores the various uses of saliva in healing practices in Jewish and Christian circles in the first centuries of our era. Talmudic, Christian, and even pagan sources make mention of saliva being used to heal a variety of pathologies. A reading of these sources indicates that the use of medicinal saliva was known, notably for the treatment of certain ophthalmological pathologies. Talmudic sources speak of the healing practices of Jewish Christians. These were incantatory practices involving the invocation of the name of Jesus. A bitter struggle mobilized the sages in an effort to contain a phenomenon that they deemed dangerous. From an historical point of view, the threat consisted in the growing attraction of other Jews to Jewish Christians because of these practices. The sages feared that any actual healing would draw Jews to Jewish Christian communities. The passages in Talmudic literature relating stories of Jewish Christian healers treating other Jews are well known. They demonstrate the vehemence with which the sages responded to these magic treatments. Quite surprisingly, in many cases, they considered it preferable to die rather than to be treated by Jewish Christian. This is at odds with post second Temple Tannaitic conceptions celebrating life as a supreme value.¹

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1 tHul 2:22-23 (ed. Zuckerman p. 503); yShab 14:4/14d-15a (= yAZ 2:2/40d-41a); QohR 1:8; bAZ 27b. See also yShab 14:4, 14d (= yAZ 2: 2/40d); QohR

These Talmudic passages often describe very specific practices, such as whispering magic formulas in connection with reciting Biblical verses or using saliva as a medicinal substance.²

The aim of this study is to shed light on these Jewish Christian practices and explore the nature of the struggle against them by the sages. Do the passages in Talmudic literature speak of condemned medicinal practices? If so, do these healing practices resemble the magic practices of Jewish Christians? Of great value to us in understanding this question is the passage in mSanh 10:1 concerning those who have no share in the world to come, because they whisper incantations over a wound (והלוּחָשׁ עַל הַמִּכָּה), pronouncing the verse, “I will bring none of these diseases upon thee that I brought upon the Egyptians for I am the Lord that healeth thee” (Ex 15:26). According to some scholars, this verse was used in incantatory healing treatments by Jewish Christians.³ Hence, if we are in fact dealing with Jewish Christians, it is clear that by the 2nd century they were being censured (exclusion from the world to come) for their use of magic for medicinal practices.

This inference is substantiated by parallel sources, notably tSanh 12:10 where we find the same ruling about those who make use of similar practices. Here the passage adds the Hebrew term וּרְוָקֵק (*we-roqeq*), which means that the act of spitting was associated to the Exodus 15:26 incantation.⁴

Such a ceremony must have been a long-standing tradition over an extended period of time since later sources attest to it. A first Babylonian version of *Sanhedrin* 10:1, attributed to R. Yohanan, states that any mention of the divine name in connection with spitting is prohibited:

והלוּחָשׁ עַל הַמִּכָּה : אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוָנָן וּבָרוּךְ בָּה לְפִי שָׁאֵן מִזְכִּירֵין שֵׁם שָׁמִים עַל הַرְקִיקָה

10:5. For more on this subject, see DAN JAFFÉ, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme. Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique, Ier-IIe siècle*, Paris 2005, pp. 179-235 ; *Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme. Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature talmudique*, Paris 2007, p. 73-81.

2 Interestingly, these practices are found as much in Palestinian as in Babylonian literature.

3 Cf. the critical edition of the Mishnah by HANOKH ALBECK, *The Mishna. Seder Nezikin*, Jerusalem 1953, p. 455; MICHAEL AVI-YONAH, *In the Days of Rome and Byzantium*, Jerusalem 1980, p. 120; 123 (heb).

4 tSanh 12:10 (ed. Zuckerman p. 433). In ARN (A) 36a (ed. Schechter pp. 108-109), it is said: “He who whispers [incantations] over a wound and who spits over a wound (והלוּחָשׁ עַל הַמִּכָּה) saying the verse [...]”. It is also interesting to consider in this context the passage in tSota 14:3 that says, “When those who went about whispering verse (לֹחֲשִׁים לְחִישׁוֹת) in judgment multiplied [...], the holy spirit ceased in Israel.” Could this group be related to “those who whisper incantations”?

One who whispers [incantations] over a wound etc. R. Yohanan said, “Only if he spits in doing so because the divine name may not be pronounced in connection with spitting”.⁵

The passage goes on to specify that any scriptural recitation for healing purposes be forbidden. R. Hanina adds that this prohibition concerns any verse even if the verse is not directly related to healing.

The Palestinian version presents the opinion of Rav, who specifies that the prohibition be on spitting not on reciting scripture, while R. Joshua ben Levi also incorporates recitation of scripture as cause for “exclusion from the world to come.”⁶

R. Joshua ben Levi’s opinion is illustrated by a passage in bShevu 15b that states that he himself would recite Biblical verses before going to sleep. Reciting verses for prophylactic purposes is permissible but not for curative purposes. The question here is whether these verses constituted *voces magicae* for the sages. Furthermore, in the same passage, R. Joshua ben Levi explicitly reiterates the proscription of reciting verses for medicinal purposes (אסור להתרפאות בדברי תורה).

This opinion, expressing an intransigent and radical position on reciting verses for medicinal purposes, does not seem to have benefitted from unanimous support. A case in point can be seen in the passage from bShab 67a that mentions cutting a strand of hair from the sick person’s head and reciting Biblical verses at a distance to heal a strong fever. This obscure passage mentions reciting verses for the purposes of healing a sick person – a practice that was nearly unanimous condemned by the sages of different generations.⁷ However, although the recitation of Biblical verses for medicinal purposes seems to be presented as acceptable practice in this passage, doing so in conjunction with spitting (רקייה) would have been unanimously proscribed.⁸

5 Cf. bSanh 101a.

6 Cf. ySanh 10:1/28b.

7 As we have noted, despite the prohibition, the practice was widespread among the sages themselves. See GIDEON BOHAK, *Ancient Jewish Magic. A History*, Cambridge 2008, p. 379: “What he objected to was the use of biblical verses as spells, a use which, as we already noted throughout the present study, *was extremely common in the Jewish magical praxis of all ages*. Even the specific verse mentioned by R. Aqiva is well attested not only on Samaritan amuletic pendants and rings, but also on the Jewish amulets of late antiquity, including one found in the Nirim synagogue” (the emphasis is ours).

8 See the still relevant study by LUDWIG BLAU, “Das Altjüdische Zauberwesen,” in: *Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule in Budapest*, Budapest 1898, pp. 68-70.

According to George F. Moore, reciting Biblical verses was common medicinal practice among the sages and did not run counter to rabbinic standards. Furthermore, he argues, R. Aqiba's proclamation in mSanh 10:1 about those who whisper incantations (וְלֹוחֶשׁ עַל הַמְכָה) specifically concerned the verse Exodus 15:26 and no other Biblical verses. According to him, this verse may have been modified to read "None of the diseases which I inflicted on the Egyptians, I will inflict on thee: I am the Lord *Jesus*, thy healer." As such, the verse would have represented the foundation of early Christian faith in the infallible capacity of the name of Jesus to heal.⁹

Saliva in medicinal practices in the New Testament

There are many references in New Testament literature to acts of healing by Jesus and his disciples, clearly showing that one of the practices associated with Jesus was healing or easing the suffering of the sick. It is not easy for the historian to tease out the historicity of these texts, where religious tradition and Christological exegesis have predominated and historical research seems unobtainable. The Gospels portray Jesus as a healer and miracle worker, whose purpose is to illuminate the lives of people living outside the faith – a fault characterized by sickness and suffering. Thus, restoring sight to the blind will serve as an occasion for a catechesis on faith, as the eye makes it possible to recognize Jesus resuscitated; and healing deafness will serve as an occasion to call on the sick to heed the Word of Christ.¹⁰ In

9 Cf. GEORGE F. MOORE, "The Definition of the Jewish Canon and the Repudiation of Christian Scriptures," in: SID Z. LEIMAN (ed.), *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible*, New York 1974, pp. 131-132; see also LOUIS GINZBERG, "Some Observations on the Attitude of the Synagogue towards the Apocalyptic-Eschatological Writings," in: JACOB B. AGUS (ed.), *Judaism and Christianity Selected Accounts 1892-1962*, New York 1973, pp. 123-124. Contra ASHER FINKEL, "Yavneh's Liturgy and Early Christianity," in: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (1981), pp. 231-250, esp. p. 241 n. 45. Interestingly, Asher Finkel, relying on MOSES GASTER, *Studies and Texts*, New York 1971, vol. III, p. 112, maintains that the Samaritans pronounced the verse from Exodus 15:26 for healing purposes. See the references to this verse and magical spells cited in JOSEPH NAVEH and SHAUL SHAKED, *Magic Spells and Formulae. Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 22-23.

10 Cf. JEAN-PIERRE CHARLIER, *Signes et prodiges. Les miracles dans l'Evangile*, Paris 1987, p. 46, who, after a brief introduction to the stories of healing and exorcism in the Gospels, notes, "This being said, in the area of stories of healing, historical criticism, even if it is practiced with precision and skill, cannot always lead to certainties."

this way, the Evangelists took care to depict Jesus as reconciling the healing of the sick with the revelation of the word of Christ. The deaf, blind, mute, lame, and paralytic whom he heals take leave of their infirmities, redeemed as they are by their faith in Jesus Christ. The stories of healing described in the Gospels thereby evidence the essential diptych, underpinned by the concepts of *Health* and *Salvation*.¹¹ Jesus' prophylactic approach relies on the efficacy of his word, his gesture, or his saliva. He employs touch,¹² laying of the hands,¹³ and the mediation of a garment,¹⁴ a handkerchief¹⁵ or even a shadow.¹⁶ There is nothing normative about the way Jesus proceeds in his healing: most of the time, the sick person is brought to him; at other times, Jesus himself takes the initiative and proceeds to heal after a few words or at the end of some practice. It is not surprising therefore, that therapeutic practices constitute a non-negligible element of apostolic preaching and more broadly of Christian tradition in general.¹⁷ Of the many stories about healings by Jesus in primitive Christian literature, we will focus here on three – texts that are related by the therapeutic practice that Jesus used.

The first passage is from Mark 7:31-37:

Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue (ἔβαλεν τοὺς δακτύλους αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰ ὄτα αὐτοῦ, καὶ πτύσας ἤψατο τῆς γλώσσης αὐτοῦ). Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it.

11 Cf. IRÉNÉE NOYÉ, art. “Maladie,” in : *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, Paris, 1980, pp. 141-143 ; CLAUDE TASSIN, “Jésus, exorciste et guérisseur,” in : *Spiritus* 120 (1990), pp. 285-303, and esp. p. 291 ; IRÉNÉE NOYÉ / CLAUDE TASSIN, “Les gestes miraculeux : enquête sur le milieu juif”, in : *Le monde de la bible* 76 (1992), pp. 20-24, esp. p. 23.

12 Mt 9, 29, Mk 1:31, 41, 5:41, 7:33, 8:23, Lk 14:4, Ac 3:7.

13 Mk 5:23, 7:32, Lk 13:13.

14 Mk 5:27, 6:56.

15 Acts 19:12.

16 Acts 5:15.

17 Cf. Acts 3:1-10; Epistle of James 5:14; CHARLIER, *Signes et prodiges* (note 10), p. 36; TASSIN, “Jésus, exorciste et guérisseur” (note 11), pp. 297-300.

And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

To begin with, it should be noted that Mark is the only one of the four Evangelists to relate this story of healing. The request put to Jesus is that he lay his hand on the sufferer. Instead, he takes the person away from the crowd to heal him with two gestures and the pronunciation of a word, preceded by a sigh or a moan. The first gesture is touching the two affected organs, one after the other: the ears and then the tongue. He puts his fingers – maybe the index on each hand – in the sick person’s ears; we know that fingers according to ancient traditions were invested with a certain degree energy with healing powers.¹⁸ Then Jesus uses his saliva, spitting no doubt in one of his palms or on his finger, and placing the saliva on the tongue of the sick person.¹⁹ It thus appears that Jesus was simply using healing practices common in his day: in this case, localized physical contact of saliva, purported source of life and of speech.²⁰ In addition, in this case the act is accompanied by a sigh or moan²¹ – both expressions of an ardent call to

18 yKet 12:3/35a relates that Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi suffered from a toothache for thirteen years that was cured by the prophet Elijah touching it. Among the healings of Epidaurus, the blind Alketas of Halieis dreamt that the god approached him and opened his eyes with his fingers, (see RUDOLF HERZOG, *Die Wunderheilungen von Epidauros*, Leipzig 1931, pp. 14-15, n. 14). Note that in the Bible and the New Testament, the finger of God designates his power; see, among others, BERNARD COURROYER, “Le ‘doigt de Dieu’ (Exodus VIII:15),” in : *Revue biblique* 63 (1956), pp. 481-495; ROBERT W. WALL, ““The Finger of God”. Deuteronomy 9:10 and Luke 11:20,” in: *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987), pp. 144-150.

19 In his commentary on Mark, JOEL MARCUS (*The Anchor Bible. Mark 1-8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York 2000, p. 473) notes, “Mark does not say *where* Jesus spits. There seem to be three possibilities: (1) He spits on the ground as a sign of contempt for the evil spirit that is afflicting the man (...). (2) He spits on his fingers, with which he subsequently touches the man’s tongue. (3) He spits in the man’s mouth (cf. *vol. Sanh.* 12:10, where R. Aqiba anathematizes magicians who spit on a wound). Of these possibilities, number 2 seems the most likely, since Jesus’ fingers have just been mentioned, whereas the ground and the mute’s mouth have not”.

20 JACQUES HERVIEUX, *L’Evangile de Marc. Commentaire pastoral*, Paris 1991, p. 106; HENDRIK VAN DER LOOS, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 8), Leiden 1965, p. 311, argues that saliva was used as a means of healing to penetrate the mind of the patient and thereby to gain his trust. He sees the use of saliva as being not only a sign or symbol, but also the medium through which Salvation is brought.

21 Sighing often accompanies magic formulas in Jesus’s days. For more on this

God to use his power to overcome any form of resistance in the sick person's body.²² In addition, according to Jacques Hervieux, these two expressions of supplication and the Aramaic word pronounced by Jesus "are precious indications of the historicity of this healing."²³

The second passage comes from Mark 8:22-26:

Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes²⁴ (καὶ πτύσας εἰς τὰ ὄμματα αὐτοῦ), and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. He looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking."

Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly. Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town."

Here again, the healing is accomplished using saliva and spitting. This time it is a two-step progressive cure, but the need to move away from the crowd is repeated. Jesus starts by spitting on the blind man's eyes,²⁵ and only after that, he adds the healing touch. In addition, in asking the person about the effect of his treatment, Jesus seems to be acting like an ordinary healer unsure of the results of his treatment. The reaction of the blind man in verse 24 indicates the beginning of healing but it is incomplete: the blind man sees trees instead of people. Jesus repeats his gesture, putting saliva on the blind man's eyes with his fingers, and thereby restoring the man's sight.²⁶

subject, see KARL PREISENDANZ / ALBERT HENRICHES, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, Stuttgart 1974, vol. I, p. 4, 1408; vol. II, p. 7, 763; 12, 945; CAMPBELL BONNER, "Trace of Thaumaturgie Technique in the Miracles," in: *Harvard Theological Review* 20 (1927), pp. 171-181; MARTIN DIBELIUS, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, ed. by Günter Bornkamm, Tübingen 1966, p. 82.

22 In Mark, this supplication stands out radically from the authority with which Jesus carries out this kind of healing elsewhere. See, e.g., Mk, 1:25, 41; 2:11; 5:8, 41; 7:29; 9:25; 10:52.

23 Cf. HERVIEUX, *L'Evangile de Marc* (note 20), p. 106-107.

24 Other translations have: "After spitting on his eyes."

25 The substantive ὄμμα appears only once in the New Testament (Mt 20:34). On this poetic term that came into everyday use (Septuagint, Papyrus), see the documentation by EARL S. JOHNSON, "Mark VIII. 22-26: The Blind Man from Bethsaida," in: *New Testament Studies* 25 (1978-1979), pp. 370-383, esp. p. 375.

26 Cf. ROBERT BEAUVERY, "La guérison d'un aveugle à Bethsaïde (Mk 8, 22-26)," in: *Nouvelle revue théologique* 90 (1968), pp. 1083-1091, esp. p. 1089, who compares the healing by Jesus using saliva to Tobit restoring his father's sight by applying the gall of fish to his eyes (Tob 11:7-12).

The last passage is John 9:1-7:

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay (ταῦτα εἰπών, ἔπιτισεν χαμά, καὶ ἐποίησεν πηλὸν ἐκ τοῦ πτύσματος, καὶ ἐπέχρισεν τὸν πηλὸν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὄφθαλμοὺς τοῦ τυφλοῦ). He said to him, “Go, and wash in the pool of Siloam” (which is translated, *sent*). Therefore, he went and washed, and came back seeing.

Here, the story of the healing takes up two verses only and features some variations compared with the two preceding passages. Firstly, Jesus does not put the saliva directly on the blind man’s eyes; he uses it to make clay, which he then applies to the blind man’s eyes. The result of the treatment is not immediate; it is accomplished in two steps: first, the healing procedure that Jesus applies using saliva, followed by an immersion in the pool of Siloam. Thus, the healing by Jesus is only partial and requires the water of the pool of Siloam to be complete.²⁷

In all three stories cited above, the healing is accomplished by spitting and applying the saliva to the infirmity. However, although saliva possesses therapeutic virtues in the three cases, the stories of Mark and John differ significantly. In Mk 8:23-25, after the saliva is applied, the blind man is asked if he sees and only gradually does he recover his sight. In the case of the deaf-dumb man in Mk 7:32-35, the application of saliva is accompanied by a healing word “Ephphatha” pronounced after a moment of silence when Jesus lifts his eyes to the sky and sighs. Only after all this is the man’s hearing and speech restored.

In Jn 9:6-7, after the saliva was applied, the man is told to go immerse himself in the pool of Siloam. He follows the received prescriptions and comes out having recovered his sight. This detail adds a dimension to the story insofar as the sick person is invited to cooperate in his cure. Indeed, his willingness to obey Jesus’s injunction is a crucial element in the healing process and an indicator of the patient’s *suggestibility*. The fact that he goes to Siloam without Jesus accompanying him, relying on his determination

27 Cf. SIMON LÉGASSE, “L’historien en quête de l’événement,” in : XAVIER LÉON-DUFOUR (ed.), *Les Miracles de Jésus selon le Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1977, pp. 109-145, esp. p. 134.

alone, underscores the participation of the sick person in his own treatment, unlike the blind man and the deaf-mute man described by Mark who are portrayed as completely passive throughout their treatment.

Magic therapies and the use of saliva in the Talmud

We have already noted that the sages prohibited the use of spittle for medicinal purposes.²⁸ Spitting in conjunction with pronouncing the name of God or certain Biblical verses was also banned. Indeed, this practice was defined as an incantation, and was prohibited for this reason.²⁹

It is reasonable to suppose that Jesus's practice of using saliva to heal the sick persisted among the early disciples, and later in Jewish Christian groups. There is also reason to suppose that the sages knew about this practice – and it may even have been in use amongst Galilean Jews in Jesus' times – and that it became progressively prohibited with the exclusion of Jewish Christians from the Synagogue at the end of the 1st century. From the New Testament passages testifying to this type of practice in the Galilean milieu, we can learn about the development of a specifically Christian tradition of healing based on the practices of Jesus himself.³⁰ This enables us to understand better passages like that in tHullin 2:22-23, where Jacob the *Min* proposes to save the life of R. El'azar ben Damah by invoking the name of Jesus.

Surprisingly, the use of saliva for medicinal purposes was a practice found among the sages. Talmudic literature mentioned it as a means of treatment of ocular problems. Jesus, as we have seen, used it for this purpose, too.

28 See the explanations proposed by JOHN H. BERNARD, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John*, Edinburg 1953, vol. II, p. 327: “*It was, apparently, a current belief in Judaea that spittle was good for diseased eyes, and that Jesus accommodated Himself to that belief is reported both by Mk. And Jn., although in neither case is it stated that He Himself accepted it as well founded. This tradition of Jesus curing blindness by means of His spittle is not found in Mt. or Lk. It is evidently the oldest tradition.*” (The emphasis is ours). Note that in his commentary on John, GEORGE-RAYMOND BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John* (World Biblical Commentary, vol. 36), Nashville 1999, p. 155, compares like passage to bSanh 12:10.

29 This prohibition seems to have been current for an extended period of time since it can be found in such texts as tSanh 12:10 (ed. Zuckerman p. 433), bSanh 101a, and ARN (A) 36/a (ed. Schechter p. 108-109).

30 The same conclusion was reached by GINZBERG, “Some Observations on the Attitude” (note 9), p. 123 n. 20; RAYMOND E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (The Anchor Bible, vol. 29), New York 1966 [reprint London 1975], vol. I, p. 372; CHARLES K. BARRETT, *The Gospel According to St John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, London 1978, p. 358.

The Jerusalem Talmud in yShab 14:4/14d (= yAZ 2:2/40d) discusses the liquids that can be used on the Sabbath to treat pain in the teeth or loins. The general principle is that it is permissible to rub yourself with liquids that would also serve for ordinary purposes the rest of the week. The Mishnah mentions the prohibition to rub the loins with wine or vinegar, but the use of oil for this purpose is permitted.

In this context, Samuel (a Babylonian sage from the first half of the 3rd century) says that it is prohibited to put tasteless spit onto the eye on the Sabbath; since it is a remedy, it is forbidden on the Sabbath.³¹ The medicinal practices proposed by Jewish Christians are found in the Jerusalem Talmud bShab 14:4/14d (= yAZ 2:2/40d), which evidences the state of mind already current in the 2nd century:

His grandson [the grandson of R. Joshua ben Levi] had swallowed something. A man came and whispered to him [something] in the name of Yeshu ben Pandera, and he got well. When he went out, he (Joshua ben Levi) asked him, “What did you say over him?” He answered, “A certain word.” He said, “It had been better for him had he died and not heard this word.” And it happened to him [that he died], [as it is said], “As it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler” [Eccles. 10:5].³²

The main protagonist of this passage, R. Joshua ben Levi, is one of the most eminent sages of the late 3rd century. A healer comes to try to save the life of his son or grandson who has a bone caught in his throat. This healer, using thaumaturgical powers, whispers incantations and succeeds in curing the patient. The boy’s life has been saved and R. Joshua ben Levi expresses dismay at the method used, going so far as to say that he would rather the boy had died than be healed in this way.

This approach runs counter to the story told about R. El’azar ben Damah who does not demonstrate approval for such practices at the outset. There is thus a difference in approach in the two texts.

Indeed, R. Joshua ben Levi demonstrates a prophylactic approach when he has the healer intervene, or even goes to look for him, according to the version of QohR 10:5. Only afterwards, does he condemn the incantatory methods used, precisely because they involved the name of Jesus. In the passage mentioned above, R. Yishmael clearly prohibits the practice that Jacob of Kfar Sama proposes. The reason for that being that he is a Jewish

31 Note a parallel passage also attributed to Samuel in bShab 108b.

32 See also QohR 10:5 which reads: “He [Joshua ben Levi] said to him: What didst thou say over him? He answered: A certain verse after a certain [man]. He said: It had been better for him that I’d buried him and not said over him that verse.”

Christian performing magical healing.³³ Since, as we can see *a posteriori*, the sages condemned therapeutic treatments by Jewish Christian healers at the end of the 3rd century with no less vehemence than at the beginning of the 2nd century, it is evident and right to assume that these practices must have been the fruit of a long tradition in Jewish Christian circles.³⁴

From this passage, we can also infer that it was not easy to identify a Jewish Christian. R. Joshua ben Levi turns to this healer without any prior knowledge of his doctrinal affiliation and without any question as to his religious identity. It is only once when the therapeutic session was over that he notices the incantation pronounced in the name of Jesus. Clearly he had no prejudices concerning the practitioner who treated his (grand)son and knew nothing about religious practices.

Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud (i.e. bBB 126b), we find a passage confirming the healing virtues of saliva. Here it is R. Hanina (a Judean sage of the early 3rd century), who seems to have taken not only seriously, but literally, the tradition that the saliva of a newborn baby possesses healing powers.³⁵

These different sources show that some sages of the 3rd century apparently considered saliva a therapeutic substance. Therefore, we can conclude that although certain sages prohibited the use of saliva for medicinal purposes because it was associated with Jewish Christian practices, this prohibition must not have been unanimously accepted.

That saliva also was used to cure eye problems we likewise can learn from the following aggadic passage in ySota 1:4/16d:

R. Levi told the following story: R. Meir would teach a lesson in the synagogue of Hamata every Friday night. There was a woman who would regularly come to listen to him. One time he was discoursing [late], and when she got home, the

33 This is also Richard Kalmin's reading in RICHARD KALMIN, "Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity," in: *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), pp. 155-169, and especially p. 162.

34 Cf. bAZ 28a: "What about R. Abihu, who too was a distinguished man, yet Jacob the Min prepared for him a medicine for his leg, and were it not for R. Ammi and R. Asi who licked his leg, he would have cut his leg off?" In this passage, R. Abihu (Judean sage from the late 3rd century) visibly puts his faith in a *Min* called Jacob, certainly a Jewish Christian, to cure him. But the latter poisons him and the life of the sage is saved *in extremis*. Here too, the point is to highlight the prejudicial character of healing methods applied by Jewish Christians. See also JOHANN MAIER, *Jesus von Nazareth in der Talmudischen Überlieferung*, Darmstadt 1978, pp. 190-194.

35 Cf. JULIUS PREUSS, *Biblisch-talmudische Medizin*, Berlin 1923, pp. 321-322.

lamp had gone out. Her husband said to her, “Where have you been?” She said to him, “I was listening to the lesson.” He said to her, “May God do this and such to me if this woman enters her house before she goes and spits in the face of the teacher.” R. Meir discerned [what had transpired] by means of the Holy Spirit, and acted as if he had an eye ailment. He said, “Let any woman who knows how to cure an eye ailment with a charm come and recite the charm.” Her neighbours said to her, “Here is your time to go back to your house. Act as if you know how to heal his eye with a charm, and spit in his eye.” She came before him. He said to her, “Do you know how to heal an eye ailment with a charm?” From awe of him, she said, “No.” He said to her, “Don’t they spit in it seven times, and that is good for it?” When she had spat, he said to her, “Go and tell your husband, ‘you told me [to spit] once, and I spat seven times’.”³⁶

As we have seen, Jesus used his saliva to heal a deaf-mute and two blind men. This practice is referred to also in some pagan sources going back to the time of Jesus and a little after – sources which give us an in-depth picture of medicinal practices of the 1st century and tell us more about the pharmacopeia of that period. Thus, it is legitimate to suppose that Jesus knew the practices of his day and used them as well.³⁷

As Etienne Trocmé notes, Jesus and his disciples used popular medicinal methods common in Judea and its environs in their days. Moreover, according to him, these gestures were common among healers of this period, because there was nothing specifically “Christological” in them.³⁸ However, not all scholars agreed to this view, the reason for that being the use of spittle, as they discovered, as an ancient liturgical practice accompanying the baptismal ceremony, too.³⁹ This theme is picked up in patristic literature

36 Slightly modified translation by JACOB NEUSNER, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, vol. XXVII: *Sotah*, Chicago 1984, p. 31. See also WayR 9:9.

37 Cf. LÉGASSE, “L’historien en quête de l’événement” (note 27), pp. 121-122, and Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (note 20), p. 309 n. 4.

38 Cf. ÉTIENNE TROCMÉ, *L’Evangile selon Saint Marc* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, Sér. 2,2), Genève 2000, pp. 209-210, 223.

39 Cf. G. MINETTE DE TILLESSE, *Le secret messianique dans l’Evangile de Marc* (Lectio Divina, vol. 47), Paris 1968, p. 61, who argues that the use of saliva “is not explicitly attested in very ancient times” (p. 62). See also LOUIS DUCHESNE, *Origine du culte chrétien. Etude sur la liturgie latine avant Charlemagne*, Paris 1925, p. 321, who maintains that the use of saliva is not a primitive practice, and that originally consecrated oil was used (anointing nostrils was substituted for anointing the tongue). THIERRY MAERTENS, *Histoire et pastorale du rituel du catéchuménat et du baptême*, Bruges 1962, pp. 135-137, is more affirmative, on the other hand; according to him, saliva was regarded by Semites as solidified breath. In this case, Mark would be testifying to an ancient practice.

where the baptismal symbolism of the healing of the blind man according to John 9:1-7, is particularly emphasized.⁴⁰

Jewish Christians and the use of saliva

At this point, we can summarize our conclusions as follows:

- Tannaitic sources (Mishnah and Tosefta) prohibit the recitation of incantatory invocations and the use of spit.
- The Tosefta mentions acts of thaumaturgical healings based on invoking the name of Jesus.
- The rabbinic world deems that it is better to die than to be cured invoking the name of Jesus.

As explained above, reciting Biblical verses, whispering spells, and using saliva for medicinal purposes were widespread in the rabbinic world and likewise adopted by Jewish Christians. Since these magic therapies were applied in connection with the name of Jesus, the sages prohibited them unanimously. Thus, we are dealing with practices that initially were Jewish, but once Jewish Christians adopted (and adapted) them, the sages decided to reject them.⁴¹ However, it remains important to study what later Christian traditions and sources tell us about the therapeutic qualities attributed to saliva amongst Jewish Christians, provoking the question, whether Jewish Christians continued to use spitting for medicinal purposes? E.g., is there any connection between such medical-magical practices and the healing of snakebites?

Some references show that the Elcesaïtes practiced multiple ablutions and immersions, so much so that they were listed among Jewish Christian Baptists, just like the Ebionites.⁴²

40 Cf. TERTULLIEN, *Traité du baptême*, V, 5, introduction, texte critique et notes par R. P. Refoulé ; traduction en collaboration avec M. Drouzy (Sources Chrétiennes n° 35), Paris 1952, p. 74); AMBROISE DE MILAN, *Des sacrements*, II, 3; 7, Texte établi, traduit et annoté par Bernard Botte (Sources Chrétiennes n° 25 bis), Paris 1961, pp. 74-77; AMBROISE DE MILAN, *Des mystères*, IV, 22-24 (ibid. p. 166-169); CHROMACE D'AQUILÉE, *Sermons*, XIV, introduction, texte critique, notes, par J. Lemarié ; traduit par H. Tardif (Sources Chrétiennes n° 154), Paris, 1969, p. 238-247) ; CYPRIEN DE CARTHAGE, *Epîtres*, XII, 2 (Patrologiae, Cursus Completus, vol. IV, p. 259); CYPRIEN DE CARTHAGE, *Testimoniorum*, III, 27 (Patrologiae, Cursus Completus, vol. IV, p. 751).

41 Cf. JAFFÉ, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme* (note 1), p. 179-235.

42 Cf. JOSEPH THOMAS, *Le mouvement baptiste en Palestine et Syrie (150 av. J.-C. – 300 ap. J.-C.)*, Gembloux 1935, pp. 140-156; SIMON CLAUDE MIMOUNI, “Les elkaïsâïtes : états des questions et des recherches,” in : PETER J. TOMSON / DORIS LAMBERS-PETRY (eds.), *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and*

In his famous compendium of heresies, Epiphanius of Salamis mentioned the name Elxai in relation to the *Ossaean* sect. According to Epiphanius, Marthus and Marthana, two sisters descended from Elxai, were worshipped as prophetesses on Ossaeon territory – that is, among the trans-Jordan Elcesaite communities. He also says that spittle and other dirt from the bodies of the two sisters were taken as a protection against diseases,⁴³ and he adds that the crowds would follow them, scrupulously gathering even the dust from their feet for healing the sick. In this same section, Epiphanius specifies that the saliva of Marthus and Marthana was also used in phylacteries and amulets for medicinal purposes.⁴⁴ The name of Elxai occurs again in the compendium in a section that is no less relevant to our discussion, because it deals with the use of water for snakebites, associating it to the ritual practices of Ebionites:

How many other dreadful, false, observances they have, chockfull of wickedness! When one of them falls ill or is bitten by a snake, he gets into water and invokes the names in Elxai – of heaven, earth, salt, water, winds, ‘angels of righteousness’ as they say, bread and oil – and begins to say, ‘Come to my aid and rid me of my pain!’⁴⁵

According to Epiphanius’s description, these immersions in water as a remedy for snakebites were connected with the invocation of the name of Elxai used as an incantatory formula.⁴⁶

Christian Literature (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 158), Tübingen 2003, pp 209-229; SIMON CLAUDE MIMOUNI, “Un rituel ‘mystérique’ des baptistes judéo-chrétiens des premiers siècles de notre ère ?” in: PAUL B. FENTON / ROLAND GOETSCHEL (eds.), *Expérience et écritures mystiques dans les religions du Livre. Actes d'un colloque international tenu par le Centre d'études juives. Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne 1994*, Leiden 2000, pp. 55-74.

43 EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, *Panarion* 19, 2:4-5.

44 EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, *Panarion* 52, 1:6.

45 EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, *Panarion* 30, 17:4.

46 Erik Peterson’s thesis regarding the symbolic meaning of snakebites representing concupiscence seems not very convincing. See ERIK PETERSON, “Le traitement de la rage par les Elkésaïtes d’après Hippolyte,” in: *Recherche de science religieuse* 34 (1947), pp. 232-238 = “Die Behandlung der Tollwut bei den Elchasaiten nach Hippolyt (Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ritus und der Theologie der altchristlichen Taufe),” in his book: *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis*, Fribourg 1959, pp. 221-235. On the elements in this passage, see the comments by GERARD P. LUTTIKHUIZEN, *The Revelation of Elchasai. Investigations into the Evidence for a Mesopotamian Jewish Apocalypse on the Second Century and its Reception by Judeo-Christian Propagandists* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, vol. 8), Tübingen 1985, pp. 118-119. Lastly, see PETRI LUOMANEN, *Recovering Jewish-*

From the information contained in Epiphanius's compendium of heresies, we may learn that the Elcesaites believed saliva to possess magical healing powers. In addition to that, their ritual use of water for medicinal purposes figures among the many ablutions and immersions characterizing the practices of this sect. Thus, they treated snakebites with ablutions of water and placed saliva in phylacteries and amulets to ward off suffering and sickness. Finally, they invoked the name of Elxai when reciting incantations in connection with magical practices.

According to Talmudic sources, whispering incantations in the name of Jesus was a common practice among Jewish Christians, and it seems that among the same groups, the name of Elxai may have been introduced later to replace the name of Jesus. In addition to that, as the Tosefta relates, the use of saliva is also found among the Elcesaites. Perhaps, the famous passage in *tHullin* (quoted above) should be considered in this context:

Ma‘aseh B: R. El‘azar ben Damah was bitten by a snake. Jacob of Kfar Sama came to heal him in the name of *Yeshua ben Pantera*, but R. Ishmael did not allow him. They said to him, “You are not permitted, Ben Damah. He said to him, “I shall bring you a proof that he may heal me.” However, he did not have time to bring the proof before he dropped dead. Said R. Ishmael, “Happy are you, Ben Damah, for you have expired in peace, but you did not break down the hedge erected by the sages. For whoever breaks down the hedge erected by the sages eventually suffers punishment, as it is said, “He who breaks down a hedge is bitten by a snake” (*Qoh.* 10:8).

If we examine this passage (along with the one about R. Joshua ben Levi's grandson) in light of the literary testimonies related by Epiphanius of Salamis, we may formulate the following hypothesis: The Jewish Christians, referred to in this passage, would count among the groups, which use saliva (according to the passage in *tSanh* 12:10), and could be identified as Ebionites or Elcesaites. Of course, this is not a certitude but rather merely a working hypothesis in view of enhancing our historical insight about the sensitive issue of sources on Judeo-Christianity in the Talmud.⁴⁷

Christian Sects and Gospel (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 110), Leiden / Boston 2012, pp. 30-34; 41-44.

47 For more on the use of saliva for medicinal purposes in the pagan world, see PLINY THE ELDER, *The Natural History*, 28, 7; TACITUS, *The Histories*, 4, 81 etc.