



# The Christian Question in Jamnia Academy at the End of the 1st Century AD? An Attempt to Re- and De-construct the “Myth”

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**Abstract:** The author of this article asks whether the Christian question was discussed in Jamnia Academy at the end of the first century. In order to find the answer, an attempt is made to determine, based on the sources, what happened in the Jamnia Academy at that time (1). The literature on this issue indicates that a synod was held at Jamnia, which established the canon of Jewish sacred books, rejected the Septuagint as an inspired book and excluded Christians from the Synagogue. The second part of the article seeks to re- and de-construct the “myth of Jamnia” (2) while its third part provides the answer to the central question asked in the title (3). The conclusion proves that only the thesis that Christians were excluded from the Synagogue is supported by the sources.

**Keywords:** Jamnia, the Council of Jamnia, *Birkat ha-Minim*, Septuagint, the parting of the ways of the Church and the Synagogue

The small town, whose Hebrew name is *Jabneh* and Greek name is *Jamnia* or *Jamneia*, is most often identified with today’s Yibna, located near Tel Aviv, fifteen kilometers southwest of Ramla.<sup>1</sup> According to Talmudic tradition, it was to become the seat of Jewish scholars even before the fall of the temple, shortly after Yohanan ben Zakkai prophesied to Vespasian that he would become emperor (*Gittin* 66.1).<sup>2</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, the Sanhedrin, which was headed by Yohanan ben Zakkai, was to move here (*Rosh Hashanah* 31,1).<sup>3</sup> It was here that the process of the renewal of Judaism, i.e. the transition from its biblical to rabbinic form, was to begin.<sup>4</sup> There was a persistent belief that the seat of the Council of Elders was located in a vineyard, but there is no evidence for this. Talmudic treatises only mention that members of the Sanhedrin used to sit in rows resembling rows of vines planted in vineyards

<sup>1</sup> Gottheil – Seligsohn, “Jabneh,” 18. In the Vulgate, Jerome refers to the city by the term *Iabniae*; Lewis, “Council of Jamnia,” 634. In this article the name “Jamnia” shall be used.

<sup>2</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen (*The Significance of Yavneh*, 45) calls the Talmudic mention of the event a “legend.”

<sup>3</sup> Gafni, “The Historical Background,” 29.

<sup>4</sup> Georgi, “The Early Church,” 53.

(*Eduyyot* 2,4; TJ *Berakhot* 4,1).<sup>5</sup> The academy survived until the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–135).

Far more important, however – as far as the Christian question is concerned – are other beliefs that were almost universal among scholars for several decades of the twentieth century. Shaye J.D. Cohen and other authors whose work is cited in this article<sup>6</sup> note that many historians and biblical scholars have taken it for granted that a synod was held at Jamnia, at which the former Pharisees who were renamed as rabbis<sup>7</sup> defined the new orthodoxy of Judaism after the fall of the temple. During this synod, they were to exclude Christians (and other heretics) from the Synagogue and establish the canon of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>8</sup> The exclusion of the followers of Christ from the Synagogue was linked to the inclusion of the so-called blessing on the heretics (*Birkat ha-Minim*) in the daily prayer, while the establishment of the canon was linked to the rejection of the Septuagint. Today – in the light of sources – it is evident that the situation was entirely different.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars are even inclined to speak of the “myth” of Jamnia which was created to set the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the context of a specific historical event, and thus lend credibility to this form of the Jewish religion.<sup>10</sup>

This article consists of three main parts. In the first part, an attempt will be made to shed light on the beliefs that have prevailed for some time among scholars on the subject regarding the alleged synod at Jamnia (1). The second part offers an attempt to demonstrate how these beliefs were perpetuated and then abandoned (2). The third one will address the Christian question in the Jamnia academic community by asking whether, and if so to what extent, it was a subject of consideration for its rabbis (3). Findings will be presented in the conclusion of the article (4).

## 1. What Happened in Jamnia?

As recently as twenty years ago, dictionaries and works on biblical studies would have stated: “After Jerusalem’s destruction, Jamnia became the home of the Great

<sup>5</sup> It is not until the Babylonian Talmud that the rabbis are said to “came into the vineyard at Yavneh” (*b. Ber.* 63B). Cf. Newman, “The Council of Jamnia,” 331–332. However, in the 4th century, Rabbi Hijja confirms that it is said to be a vineyard because the disciples sat in rows, just as vines are planted (*Midrash Rabba* on Eccl 2,8,1).

<sup>6</sup> Günter Stemberger, Philip R. Davies, David E. Aune, Roger T. Beckwith, Shnayer Z. Leiman, Jack P. Lewis, James A. Sanders, Peter Schäfer, Mirosław S. Wróbel.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen (*The Significance of Yavneh*, 57) notes that “at no point in antiquity did the rabbis clearly see themselves either as Pharisees or as the descendants of Pharisees.”

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *The Significance of Yavneh*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Stemberger, “Jabne und der Kanon,” 163–174.

<sup>10</sup> Aune, “On the Origins,” 491; McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 334.

Sanhedrin. Around 100, a council of rabbis there established the final canon of the OT.<sup>11</sup> There was also a predominant view that the question of the relevance of the Septuagint was debated in Jamnia's academic community<sup>12</sup> and that Judeo-Christians were excluded from the Synagogue, which was linked to the rabbinic obligation to recite a prayer containing the "blessing on the heretics," who included followers of Christ. Back in 1984, Norbert Mendecki wrote: "During his [Gamaliel II's] term of office, the so-called Council of Jamnia was held. The term is used to describe a number of laws and decisions issued by Jamnia's teachers. One of these laws was the approval or new development of the so-called blessing on the heretics (*Birkat ha-Minim*)."<sup>13</sup>

This section of the article confronts these now mostly outdated opinions with the source material. However, one should be aware that the source material does not date from the late first century AD, but comes from later times, hence it must be taken into account that the information it contains may have been transformed in the process of transmission. An essential source of knowledge about early rabbinic Judaism is the Mishnah, whose final editing probably dates to the end of the second century, but whose origins can be traced to several centuries earlier, and whose writing was inspired by a circle of Jamnia scholars.<sup>14</sup> The Mishnah became part of the Talmud in its two versions (Palestinian and Babylonian) which were edited three (Palestinian) or four (Babylonian) centuries later. Three issues will be the focus of reflection: the alleged Council of Jamnia (1), the question of the establishment of the canon of Jewish sacred scriptures there and the disputes over the Septuagint (2), and the relationship of the Jamnia academic community to the establishment of *Birkat ha-Minim* and the exclusion of followers of Christ from the Synagogue (3).

### **The Issue of the Council of Jamnia**

As mentioned, until just over half a century ago, the belief that a synod of Jewish scholars was held at the Jamnia academy was almost universal.<sup>15</sup> However, this belief is based only on the *disjecta membra* of the Mishnah and later rabbinic works.<sup>16</sup> The Mishnah states that Yohanan ben Zakkai appointed the young Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah as head of the academy. During his presidency, many resolutions or decrees were formulated, each of which is introduced in the Mishnah with the phrase "that

11 DLNT, 185. Cf.: "At the end of the first Christian century, the Jewish rabbis, at the Council of Gamnia [Jamnia], closed the canon of the Hebrew book"; Swaggart, *Catholicism & Christianity*, 129. Cf. also: Geisler - MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, 169.

12 Cohen, *The Significance of Yavneh*, 45; Frankowski, "List Arysteasza," 12-22.

13 Mendecki, "Działalność Jana ben Zakkaja," 67.

14 Overman - Scott Green, "Judaism," 1047; von Glasenaap, "Judaizm," 26; Moore, *Judaism*, 83-92; Vermes, *Jezus Żyd*, 13; Stemberger, "Dating Rabbinic Traditions," 82.

15 Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?," 125-132.

16 Cohen, *The Significance of Yavneh*, 46.

day” (Hebr. *bô bayyôm*; *Jadaim* 4,1–4; *Zebahim* 1,3). This particular phrase may have suggested to scholars the idea of a particular meeting where further norms of behavior were introduced into the religion that was devoid of its temple. Over time, this meeting came to be known as council or synod.<sup>17</sup> A passage from a much later text of the Babylonian Talmud, which states that the phrase *bô bayyôm*, used several times, refers to the same event (*Berakhot* 28,1), has become an argument to strengthen this thesis. It is clear, however, that the Mishnaic phrase “on that day,” repeated several times, interpreted in the Talmud as an indication of a single day, does not constitute a substantively convincing argument supporting the historicity of the assembly referred to in the literature as the “Council of Jamnia.”

In the light of the sources, therefore, it is not possible to say whether an event took place at Jamnia that could be called a council.<sup>18</sup> The arguments are fairly contradictory to such a thesis. Terms such as “school” (*bet ha-midrash*) or “academy” (*yeshiva*) seem much more adequate.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Issue of the Canon and the Septuagint**

For decades, many scholars had taken it for granted that it was at Jamnia that the canon of the Hebrew Bible was finally established.<sup>20</sup> This was to happen when the aforementioned Eleazar ben Azariah became president of the academy.<sup>21</sup> Such a hypothesis was first proposed by Heinrich Graetz<sup>22</sup> and was popularized by other researchers, including Frants Buhl, Herbert E. Ryle, Robert Pfeiffer and Otto Eissfeldt.<sup>23</sup> The process of canonization was supposed to be as follows. First, the books of the Torah were declared sacred, and this happened during the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah in connection with the religious reforms carried out by these kings. It was decided that absolutely nothing could be changed in the text of the five books of Moses (Deut 4:2; 13:1). The second significant moment in the formation of the canon of the Jewish Bible was the reforms of Ezra carried out after his return from Babylonian captivity (Ezra 7:14, 25–26).<sup>24</sup> Another important stage was in fact the rabbinical discussions

<sup>17</sup> Schäfer, “Die sogenannte Synode von Jabne,” 54–64.

<sup>18</sup> The first to question the hypothesis of a council at Jamnia was William M. Christie (“The Jamnia Period,” 347–364).

<sup>19</sup> Newman, “The Council of Jamnia,” 331–332.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, “Jamnia Revisited,” 145.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, “Council of Jamnia,” 634.

<sup>22</sup> Graetz, *Kohélet*, 155–156.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, “Jamnia (Jabneh),” 634; Buhl, *Kanon und Text*, 24; Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Krzysztof Pilarczyk (*Literatura żydowska*, 96) believes that the final “determination of the set of books that make up the first part of Judaism’s sacred scriptures, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, occurred before the separation of the inhabitants of Samaria, located to the north of Judea, from the community of Jewish believers linked to the cultic centre in Jerusalem. Despite growing hostility towards the Jews, the Samaritans retained the Pentateuch as their scripture. Regrettably, the date of this break-up, or the beginning

held at the Jamnia academy.<sup>25</sup> The Jamnia congregation has even been referred to in the literature as the “canonizing council.”

Source research, however, does not support this.<sup>26</sup> The process of canonization of the Hebrew Bible neither began nor ended at Jamnia.<sup>27</sup> In Christian literature, the terms “canon” and “canonical books” were not used for the first time until the fourth century, but in Jewish literature, their Jewish equivalents had already appeared in the Jamnia academic community: “scriptures” and “books that render the hands unclean/impart uncleanness.” According to Jewish law, if an item ‘renders the hands unclean,’ it means that it causes ritual impurity, which must be removed by washing the hands (*netilat yadayim*).<sup>28</sup> After using the sacred, or inspired, books, the hands must be washed.

Rabbinic sources report that the Song of Songs (*m. Yadayim* 3,5; *b. Megillah* 7,1; *Midrash Rabba* on Song 1:1:11) and the Book of Kohelet (*m. Eduyyot* 5,3; *m. Yadayim* 3,5; *b. Shabbat* 30; *b. Megillah* 7,1; *Midrash Rabba* on Lev 28:1).<sup>29</sup> Let us quote the most extensive passage in the Mishnah on this issue:

All the Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean. R. Judah says: The Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, but about Ecclesiastes there is dissension. R. Jose says: Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean, and about the Song of Songs there is dissension. [...] R. Simeon b. Azzai said: I have heard a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they made R. Eleazar b. Azariah head of the college [of Sages], that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes both render the hands unclean. R. Akiba said: God forbid! – no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.<sup>30</sup>

The connection between “rendering one’s hands unclean” and inspiration is made evident by another passage in the Tosefta treatise *Yadayim*: “The Song of Songs imparts uncleanness to hands, because it was said by the Holy Spirit. Qohelet does not

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of the process of moving away from each other, is uncertain. It probably began in the late 4th or early 3rd century BC.”

<sup>25</sup> Some scholars have favored the thesis that the entire canon of Jewish writings was closed as early as before AD 90. This opinion was held by: Shnayer Z. Leiman (*The Canonization*); Roger T. Beckwith (*The Old Testament Canon*), Philip R. Davies (*Scribes and Schools*) and Andrew E. Steinmann (*The Oracles of God*). Cf. Sanders, “The Canonical Process,” 230.

<sup>26</sup> For an extensive study challenging the thesis that the canon was established at Jamnia, see Newman, “The Council of Jamnia,” 319–348.

<sup>27</sup> Cohen, *The Significance of Yavneh*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Schäfer, “Die sogenannte Synode von Jabne,” 116–119.

<sup>30</sup> “Mishna Yadaim,” 781–782.

impart uncleanness of hands, because it is [merely] the wisdom of Solomon” (2:14).<sup>31</sup> The fact that the inspiration for the Song of Songs and the Book of Kohelet was discussed at Jamnia does not at all prove that the canon of Jewish sacred scriptures was established there. This discussion continued long after the Jamnia period, as rabbinic sources clearly indicate.<sup>32</sup>

Now, let us examine the issue of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in relation to Jamnia academy. The Septuagint had been used by Diaspora Jews for about three centuries. What is more, it was very popular.<sup>33</sup> Flavius and Philo made extensive use of this translation. The latter most likely did not know Hebrew at all so, in a way, he had no choice but to rely on the LXX.<sup>34</sup> In fact, even the Greek-speaking Palestinian Jews reached for the LXX, and the language of their prayers was Greek of the *Koine* variety. Evidence shows that in the synagogues of the coastal cities of Palestine, the *Shema Yisrael* prayer was recited in Greek.<sup>35</sup>

As studies show, the Jamnia rabbis made every effort to extend their jurisdiction not only to the Palestinian territories, but also to the Diaspora, including in Egypt. At some point, Gamaliel II, the grandson of Yohanan ben Zakkai, was even able to make the Jews of the Diaspora come to Jamnia to seek advice there on the principles of professing and practicing Judaism. In this way, the authority of Palestinian rabbis was successfully extended, at least in part, to the Diaspora. This had to be reflected in the decreasing role of the Septuagint in Jewish non-Palestinian communities.<sup>36</sup>

But was it at Jamnia that the final decision was made to consider the Septuagint as a book that does not render one's hands unclean? There is nothing to suggest this.<sup>37</sup> Such a view probably has its origins in the accepted view that the canon has been established at Jamnia. It is known that the criterion of canonicity adopted by the rabbis was the Hebrew language,<sup>38</sup> hence the simple conclusion that the Septuagint had to be considered a non-inspired translation.

### ***Birkat ha-Minim* and the Issue of the Exclusion of Christians from the Synagogue**

According to Talmudic tradition (*b. Berakhot* 28,2–29,1), in Jamnia, Samuel the Lesser, during the time of Gamaliel II, included in the daily *Shemoneh 'Esreh* prayer

<sup>31</sup> Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 1908.

<sup>32</sup> Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament*, 486.

<sup>33</sup> Jędrzejewski, “Septuaginta,” 245.

<sup>34</sup> Jędrzejewski, “Judaizm diasporę,” 21.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, “The Place of the Rabbi,” 953.

<sup>36</sup> Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*, 245–247; Alon, *The Jews*, 119–131.

<sup>37</sup> Lust, “Septuagint and Canon,” 55.

<sup>38</sup> While in *Megillah* (9,1) the rabbis claim that the translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek were under divine inspiration, in *Soferim* (1,7) they already compare the day the Septuagint was written to the day of the idolatrous worship of the golden calf in the desert; Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 68.

the twelfth blessing, known as the blessing against heretics (Hebrew: *minim*).<sup>39</sup> The passage in question reads: “Said Rabban Gamaliel to sages, «Does anyone know how to ordain a ‘blessing’ [curse] against the Sadducees [minim]?» Samuel the younger went and ordained it (*b. Ber.* 4:3; 28A).<sup>40</sup> The Gemara relates: “A year later he [Samuel the younger] forgot it, and for two or three hours he attempted to recover it. But they did not remove him [as leader of the worship-service].” (*b. Ber.* 4:3; 28B-29A).<sup>41</sup>

This is also confirmed by other texts (*b. Megillah* 17:2; *Numbers Rabba* 18:210). The rabbis obliged followers of Judaism to recite the *Shemoneh ‘Esreh* at least twice a day.<sup>42</sup> According to some editions of the Babylonian Talmud, the *Berakhot* tractate contains the passage: “If anyone tells you that there are only seventeen blessings, say to him: the Sages in Jamnia added ‘o *minim*’ to the prayer” (18:4).

This benediction, sometimes referred to as the “blessing against the apostates” or the “blessing against heretics,”<sup>43</sup> has two versions, the Palestinian and the Babylonian one. The Babylonian version reads:<sup>44</sup>

May no hope be left to the slanderers;  
but may wickedness perish as in a moment; may all Thine enemies be soon cut off,  
and do Thou speedily uproot the haughty and shatter and humble them speedily in our  
days. Blessed be Thou, O Lord, who strikest down enemies and humblest the haughty.<sup>45</sup>

The Palestinian version of the twelfth blessing is quoted from S. Schechter<sup>46</sup> and D.C. Allison:

For the apostates let there be no hope.  
And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days.  
Let the nozerim and the minim be destroyed in a moment.  
And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life  
and not be inscribed together with the righteous.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.<sup>47</sup>  
For the apostates let there be no hope,  
and uproot the kingdom of arrogance, speedily and in our days.  
May the Nazarenes and the sectarians perish as in a moment.

<sup>39</sup> Sanders, “The Canonical Process,” 235; Stemberger, “Die sogenannte ‘Synode von Jabne,’” 15; Schäfer, *Studien zur Geschichte*, 45–46.

<sup>40</sup> Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 190–191.

<sup>41</sup> Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 191.

<sup>42</sup> Horbury, “The Benediction,” 19–20.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen, “In Between,” 230.

<sup>44</sup> Mann, “Genizah Fragments,” 306.

<sup>45</sup> Hirsch, “Shemoneh ‘Esreh,” 271.

<sup>46</sup> Schechter, “Genizah Specimens,” 657–659.

<sup>47</sup> Ehrlich, “Birkat Ha-Minim.”

Let them be blotted out of the book of life,  
and not be written together with the righteous.  
You are praised, O Lord, who subdues the arrogant.<sup>48</sup>

The Talmudic passage quoted above (*b. Berakhot* 28,2) is not contested in the rabbinic tradition or in Christian-Jewish polemics, so it seems that the information that Samuel the Lesser is the author of *Birkat ha-Minim* should be considered probable. However, was there an explicit decision to exclude Christians from the Synagogue in Jamnia academy? In this case, the answer could not be clear.<sup>49</sup> In the light of the Talmud, those who disseminated views contrary to the teaching of official Judaism were admonished and denied participation in the world to come, but they were not excluded from the community of Israel (*b. Sanhedrin* 12,9–13,12). Those who recited prayers that were not in line with the common teaching of Judaism were silenced, but not excluded (*m. Berakhot* 5.3; *Megillah* 4.8–9). However, insofar as one recognises that *Birkat ha-Minim* applies to Christians (as discussed below) and that those referred to in it are excluded from among the followers of Judaism, then the answer must be in the affirmative.

## 2. An Attempt to Reconstruct the Origin of the Jamnia “Myth” and its Deconstruction

At this point, time has come to ask the question of how the so-called “myth” of Jamnia emerged, consisting of at least five beliefs indicated above: that a council was held at Jamnia (1); that the canon of the Tanakh was established there (2); that the role of the Septuagint was debated and discredited (3); that the *Birkat ha-Minim* was established there (4); and that the official exclusion of Christians from the Synagogue happened at Jamnia (5). Let us try to reconstruct this process.

As far as Christian scholars are concerned, the belief in the Council of Jamnia was first expressed by Frants Buhl in his book *Kanon und Text des Alten Testaments* (1891). Buhl wrote: “the whole question [of the canon – M.R.] was brought up for discussion before a Synod at Jabne (Jamnia, a city not far from the coast, south of Jaffa), the very one at which Gamaliel II was deprived of his office of patriarch. At that Synod the canonicity of the whole of the sacred writings was acknowledged. Special emphasis was laid upon the affirmation of the canonicity, not only of Ecclesiastes

<sup>48</sup> Allison, “Blessing God,” 397.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen (*The Significance of Yavneh*, 58–59) observes this about the scholars gathered in Jamnia: “At no point did they expel anyone from the rabbinic order or from rabbinic synagogues because of doctrinal error or because of membership in some heretical group.”



but also of Canticles, which affords clear evidence of the existence of an opposition against that book.”<sup>50</sup>

The opinion of the German researcher was disseminated by H.E. Ryle in his monograph *The Canon of the Old Testament* (1892). Both F. Buhl and H.E. Ryle were probably familiar with a slightly earlier work by the distinguished nineteenth-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, entitled *Kohélet oder der Salomonische Prediger* (1871). In this monograph, the author mentions a “synod” or “synodal assembly” (German *Synodal-Versammlung*).<sup>51</sup> Christian scholars have therefore taken the idea of a synod from the work of a Jewish historian.

From where, however, could Graetz have derived information about the alleged Council of Jamnia? Is it only from the rabbinic passages mentioned above? It would be reasonable to think that there was another factor: Graetz must have read Baruch Spinoza’s work, entitled *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, first published in 1670. Spinoza argues that in post-Maccabean times, the Pharisees debated the divine inspiration of the books of the Bible and ranked them as canonical. However, the name Jamnia does not appear even once in his work. Instead, the *concilium Pharisaeorum* is mentioned twice. The first mention reads: “Qui itaque auctoritatem Sacrae Scripturae demonstrare volunt, ii auctoritatem uniuscujusque libri ostendere tenetur, nec sufficit divinitatem unius probare ad eandem de omnibus concludendam: alias statuendum concilium Pharisaeorum in hac electione librorum errare non potuisse, quod nemo unquam demonstrabit.”<sup>52</sup>

The author argues that it is not enough to demonstrate the inspiration of one book and from this infer about the entire collection, but the divine authority of each book must be demonstrated. The second mention is about the existence of a *concilium*, which was to decide on the acceptance or rejection of individual books: “Ex quibus clarissime sequitur, legis peritos concilium adhibuisse, quales libri ut sacri essent recipiendi, & quales excludendi.”<sup>53</sup> It seems reasonable to suppose that Graetz may have drawn on the Latin term *concilium* and linked it to the establishment of the academy of Jamnia. However, the Latin noun *concilium* does not necessarily indicate an “assembly” or a “gathering” (implying the existence of a synod), but can also mean a “debate,” “hearing” or “discussion.”<sup>54</sup> There are at least two arguments to support Graetz’s reliance on Spinoza: both authors claim that the canon of

<sup>50</sup> Buhl, *Canon and Text*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Graetz, *Kohélet*, 162.

<sup>52</sup> Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, 150; Aune, “On the Origins,” 492–493. Own translation: “Those, therefore, who wish to demonstrate the authority of Scripture must demonstrate the authority of each book, for it is not enough to show the divine origin of one and hence make inferences about all of them. Indeed, one must assume that the assembly of Pharisees could not have been mistaken in its choice of books, which no one will ever prove.”

<sup>53</sup> Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, 150.

<sup>54</sup> *Latin-English Dictionary* (<http://www.latin-dictionary.net/search/latin/concilium>), *Dizionario Latino Olivetti* (<https://www.dizionario-latino.com>).

the Hebrew Bible was established in the late Second Temple period; both argue that this was undertaken by the Pharisees; and the term “synod” appears in the works of both authors in this context.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Was the Question of Christians Resolved at Jamnia?

Each of the issues discussed above refers, more or less directly, to the relationship of the Jewish religion with the relatively young Christianity. This is because if a synod was held in Jamnia, it is possible that it would have been anti-Christian. The followers of Christ were in open conflict with the followers of Judaism in the first century, as the Gospel of St John expressly demonstrates.<sup>56</sup> If a canon of Jewish writings was established there and the Septuagint was discussed, this canon differed from the Christian scriptures accepted centuries later and, therefore, the Greek Bible, i.e. the Bible of the first Church, was rejected there. The Jewish difficulty with the Septuagint was that it became the Bible of Christians.<sup>57</sup> The vast majority of quotations from the books of the old covenant are not from the Hebrew Bible but from the Septuagint. The Christians, developing their mission in the *Koine* Greek language areas, drew on the translation referred to in the *Letter of (Pseudo-) Aristeas (Let. Aris. 50,273)*, extensively repeated by Flavius (*Ant. 12,11–118*).<sup>58</sup> By the time of the Jamnia academy, the LXX was already the Bible used by Christians to a much greater extent than the Hebrew Bible.<sup>59</sup> This was due to the development of the church in missionary terms, as it spread throughout the Mediterranean basin and probably into India as well, and in these areas, Greek was the dominant *lingua franca*.<sup>60</sup> Finally, if *Birkat ha-Minim* was composed in Jamnia, it is almost certain that it also (but not exclusively) applied to Christians, which would have involved their exclusion from the Synagogue.

As shown above, no synod was held at Jamnia and the definitive shape of the canon of the sacred Hebrew scriptures was not established there, which also means that no decision was made to radically reject the Septuagint. Rabbinic sources have been able, to a very negligible extent, to provide a basis for scholars to discuss the first two issues (synod and canon), while the third view (the rejection of the Septuagint)

<sup>55</sup> Aune, “On the Origins,” 493.

<sup>56</sup> Wróbel, *Synagoga a rodzący się Kościół*; Wróbel, “‘Żydzi’ Janowi,” 47–61.

<sup>57</sup> Sławik, “Stary Testament,” 431.

<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the differences between the BH and the LXX in passages such as Gen 49:10; Num 23:21; 24:7, 17 led Christians to choose the LXX version because it was far more suitable for Christological interpretation than the Hebrew version; Collins, *Jewish Cult*, 80–81.

<sup>59</sup> Waldemar Chrostowski (“Żydowskie tradycje,” 46) emphasises the Jewish origin of the Septuagint.

<sup>60</sup> Chrostowski, “Żydowskie tradycje,” 47.

is a typical calculation resulting from the thesis that the canon was established in Jamnia; it has no support in the Talmud, much less in the Mishnah.

Two final issues remain to be resolved: whether the “blessing on the heretics” was composed at Jamnia and whether it was there that Christians were excluded from the Jewish community. To answer these questions, it is necessary to specify the meaning of the terms *minim* and *notzrim*. The former occurs in both versions of the blessing, the latter only in the Palestinian version, i.e. the one associated with Jamnia. *Minim* is the term from which the entire blessing takes its name. It was presumably interpreted in different ways depending on the era. It is etymologically most likely derived from the stem *min*, meaning a person who goes “beyond” (*min*) Torah.<sup>61</sup> Since the term originated in Pharisaic circles, it was originally used to describe Jews breaking the Law and failing to observe the traditions of the elders<sup>62</sup> or the adversaries of the Pharisees (Sadducees, Essenes, collaborators with the Roman authorities).<sup>63</sup> The Sadducees, for example, are also indicated in the Mishnaic passage of the treatise *Sanhedrin*: “And these are the ones who have no portion in the world to come: He who says, the resurrection of the dead is a teaching which does not derive from the Torah, and the Torah does not come from Heaven; and an Epicurean.” (*b. Sanhedrin* 11:1; 90A).<sup>64</sup>

The same is true in the Mishnaic treatise *Megillah* (4:8).<sup>65</sup> As demonstrated by Hartmut Stegemann, it is highly probable that the Pharisees referred to the Essenes as *minim*.<sup>66</sup> The word *minim* could also mean those who collaborated with the Roman occupiers.<sup>67</sup> After AD 66, when the Judeo-Christians did not join the uprising against Rome, they could be perceived by the Pharisees as collaborators with Roman imperial power.<sup>68</sup> After the rise of rabbinic Judaism, the term *minim* was used to refer to the Jews who opposed this trend.<sup>69</sup> Some authors tend to argue that

61 Brown – Driver – Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 577–579.

62 Herford, *Christianity*, 361–397.

63 Shaye J.D. Cohen (“Judaism to the Mishnah: 135-220 CE,” 230) believes that “Just as the rabbis used the term ‘gentiles’ (*goyim*) to refer to all non-Jews, whatever their ethnic origin, theological belief or ritual practice, so too the rabbis used a single term ‘heretics’ (*minim*) to designate a wide variety of Jews whose theology or practices the rabbis found offensive.”

64 Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*, XVI, 477.

65 Wróbel, “*Birkat ha-Minim*,” 108; Simonsohn, *The Jews of Italy*, 298–301.

66 Stegemann, *Esseńczycy z Qumran*, 195–204; Overman – Scott Green, “Judaism,” 1043.

67 Charlesworth, “Jesus,” 189–192.

68 Wróbel (*Synagoga a rodzący się Kościół*, 191) argues that “[...] Judeo-Christians professing faith in the Messiah did not engage in any political messianic movements in the land of Palestine. Thus, they were suspected of supporting the policies of the Romans.” For the sake of research integrity, mention should also be made of the unlikely hypothesis that the term *minim* is an acronym for the phrase “believer in Jesus Christ.” In Hebrew it would read: *ma’amin be-Jeszu ha-Nocri*. The letters “m” (from *ma’amin*), “i” (i.e. “j”; from *be-Yeshu*) and “n” (from *ha-Nocri*) would form the word *min*, clearly indicating Christians; Mimouni, “Les Nazoréens,” 242.

69 Katz, “Issues in the Separation,” 73.

*Birkat ha-Minim* began to refer to followers of Christ in the 3rd century.<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that this neologism does not appear until the Mishnah, i.e. at the end of the 2nd century. However, this does not mean that the term *minim* was not used in colloquial speech as early as the 1st century, which is when Christianity was developing. If that was the case, the term *minim* may have referred to Christians at a time when they were regarded as Jews deriving from the Pharisees who do not keep the precepts of the Torah and disobey the traditions of the elders.<sup>71</sup> In the treatise *Hullin*, the word *minim* almost certainly refers to Christians of Jewish origin (2,20–21; 22–24).<sup>72</sup> *Hullin* (2,22–24) prohibits followers of Judaism from seeking medical advice from the *minim* and, according to the Talmud, Jesus is considered a healer using magic (*Sanhedrin* 43,2). The treatise *Hullin* is very early; its origins should probably be dated before the outbreak of the Bar Kokhba revolt.<sup>73</sup>

Considering the data mentioned above with their analysis, one can attempt to formulate a cautious hypothesis about the understanding of the term *minim*. The meaning of the term evolved over time and was dependent on the geographical location where it was used.<sup>74</sup> Due to the fact that the first literary use of the term *minim* was recorded around the year 200 AD, one should be assumed that it was earlier used in everyday speech. If the term was used in the first half of the first century (or earlier), it designated those Jews who, descending from the Pharisean movement, went “beyond” the rules of this trend of Judaism. The meaning of the term was quickly extended to include not only the Jews associated with Pharisaism, but also the Sadducees, the Essenes and the collaborators with the Roman authorities. The Judeo-Christians who did not join the uprising in the year 66 could also be included in the latter group. After the exclusion of Christians from Synagogue, probably in the second half of the second century, the term *notzrim* was used in relation to them but in some environments (especially in Babylonia, where the Church was not yet well-established) the term *minim* was still used. The meaning of the term considerably evolved over time so that in the Babylonian Talmud (VI c.) it sometimes denotes goys (non-Jews). As a result, it may be assumed that this group also includes ethno-Christians.<sup>75</sup>

As an example of how much importance the rabbis placed on the twelfth blessing, a passage from the Babylonian Talmud can be used that shows that in reciting

<sup>70</sup> This is the view held, for example, by Boyarin (“Justin Martyr,” 434): “Once the evidence of and for a so-called ‘blessing of the heretics’ before the third century is removed from the picture, there is no warrant at all to assume an early Palestinian curse directed at any Christians. I am not claiming to know that there was no such thing, but rather that we cannot know at all, and that it is certain, therefore, that we cannot build upon such a weak foundation an edifice of Jewish-Christian parting of the ways.”

<sup>71</sup> Herford, *Christianity*, 361–397.

<sup>72</sup> Herford, *Christianity*, 362.

<sup>73</sup> Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?*, 65–67.

<sup>74</sup> Rosik, *Church and Synagogue*, 278.

<sup>75</sup> Rosik, *Church and Synagogue*, 278.

all the other blessings, mistakes were permissible, but one was not allowed to make a mistake in reciting *Birkat ha-Minim* without being suspected of heresy: “If the reciter errs in any blessing, they shall not be dismissed, but if they err in the *Birkat ha-Minim* blessing, they shall be dismissed, for perhaps they themselves are *minim*” (*Berakhot* 29,1).<sup>76</sup>

The term *notzrim* also appeared in the Palestinian version of *Birkat ha-Minim*. Researchers generally agree that the term *notzrim* refers to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth and is based on two phrases from the New Testament: “He will be called a Nazarene,” (Matt 2:23) and “the Nazarene sect” (Acts 24:5).<sup>77</sup> When the ways between Church and Synagogue definitely parted, i.e. when Christians were no longer considered to be Jews, the term which was associated with them (at least in Palestine) was *notzrim*.<sup>78</sup> The term is difficult to explain etymologically. The fact that today the term refers to Christians in modern Hebrew does not at all explain the origins of its usage with regard to the followers of Christ. It may have been derived from a verb meaning “to guard,” “to oversee,” or from a noun meaning “shoot,” “branch” or “twig.”<sup>79</sup> In Isaiah, the term means “carcass”: “But thou art cast out of thy grave like an abominable *natzer*, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that went down to the bottom of the pit, as a carcass trodden under feet” (Isa 14:19). The above is not far from negative connotations. Nevertheless, in the light of the New Testament, a reference to Nazareth should rather be seen here.<sup>80</sup> Biblical scholars and historians are still debating whether the term refers exclusively to Jewish Christians or does it also refer to gentile Christians. They also ask whether it was introduced by Samuel the Younger or perhaps at a later time (in the second half of the second century). For the former, most researchers adopt the first solution,<sup>81</sup> while the second solution is adopted for the latter.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

As a summary of the analyses carried out above, it is concluded that there is no source data to confirm the convening of a synod of Jewish scholars at Jamnia in the 90s of the first century AD. Likewise, there is no indication that a definitive list of

<sup>76</sup> Wróbel, *Jezus i Jego wyznawcy*, 147. See also: Wróbel, “Znaczenie formuły *Birkat ha-Minim*,” 65–80; Alexander, “The Parting of the Ways,” 10.

<sup>77</sup> Rosik, *Church and Synagogue*, 277.

<sup>78</sup> Rosik, *Church and Synagogue*, 277.

<sup>79</sup> Wróbel, “Znaczenie formuły *Birkat ha-Minim*,” 67–69.

<sup>80</sup> Mrozek, “Chrześcijaństwo,” 21.

<sup>81</sup> Schäfer, *Studien zur Geschichte*, 48; Jocz, *The Jewish People*, 51–52.

<sup>82</sup> Thoma, “Die Christen in rabbinischer Optik,” 38; Kimelman, “Birkat Ha-Minim,” 233.

the canonical Jewish holy scriptures was established at Jamnia, nor that the Septuagint was rejected by the Palestinian rabbis.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, what seems highly probable is the composition of *Birkat ha-Minim* in Jamnia academy, and the resulting conclusion that Jewish Christians are no longer followers of the new form of Judaism known as rabbinic Judaism.

Daniel Boyarin of the University of California, Berkeley, has coined a phrase that seems to reflect well the results of the analyses presented in this article: he speaks of the so-called Jamnia (Yavneh) effect.<sup>84</sup> In his opinion, even though the rabbinic sources refer to the academy at Jamnia, thus constructing the myth of the origins of rabbinic Judaism, in fact, the opposite is true: Jamnia is not the beginning of a new path, but the effect of rabbinic disputes that sought a historical justification of how the history of Judaism unfolded after the fall of the Temple.<sup>85</sup> These disputes attributed to the academy a role that it actually did not play. According to the Jewish researcher, the entire issue of Jamnia should be de-mythologised, and then it will become clear that Rabbinic Judaism does not simply begin in a small town on the Mediterranean Sea, but is the result of complex, often highly nuanced processes within the fabric of the declining biblical Judaism.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon*, 3; Aune, “On the Origins,” 491.

<sup>84</sup> “All of the institutions of rabbinic Judaism are projected in rabbinic narrative to an origin called Yavneh. Yavneh, seen in this way, is the effect, not the cause” (Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 48).

<sup>85</sup> The author acknowledges that there was some shift in emphasis in the understanding of religiosity in Judaism after the destruction of the temple, but the nature of this shift has yet to be thoroughly investigated: “There was a significant shift from Second Temple Judaism to the rabbinic formation. The nature of that shift, it seems, still requires further specification” (Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 45).

<sup>86</sup> The author notes, for example: “Thus, where traditional scholarly historiography refers to Yavneh as a founding council that restored Judaism and established the rabbinic form as hegemonic following the disaster of the destruction of the Temple, I am more inclined to see it as a narrative whose purpose is to shore up the attempt at predominance on the part of the Rabbis (and especially the Patriarchate) in the wake of the greater debacle following the Fall of Betar in 138” (Boyarin, “Justin Martyr,” 428). Stephen G. Wilson (*Related Strangers*, 181) agrees with this view: “The influence of the Yavnean sages on Jewish thought and practice between 70 and 135 C.E. and beyond should not be overestimated. Their decisions were not imposed overnight, nor were they felt uniformly across all Jewish communities.” Boyarin’s opinion is rejected by Jacob Neusner (“The Formation of Rabbinic Judaism,” 3–42) as too extreme.

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