
Introduction: Allowing Historical Study to Serve Interfaith Dialogue

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In his book *Jesus the Jew*, Geza Vermes begins chapter 1 with these words:

Most people, whether they admit it or not, approach the Gospels with preconceived ideas. Christians read them in the light of their faith; Jews, primed with age-old suspicion . . . Yet it should not be beyond the capabilities of an educated man to sit down and with a mind empty of prejudice read the accounts of Mark, Matthew and Luke as though for the first time.¹

These words, first written in 1973, were among the very first of the so-called “Third Quest” of the historical Jesus. Already, fifteen years before N. T. Wright would coin the phrase that marked the phase, a consensus had been reached that Jesus’ Jewishness was historical fact.² An entire generation of Jesus scholars (the most productive generation in history—if measured by publications) would nuance, debate, marginalize, and reframe Jesus’ Jewishness. But the fact of Jesus’ ethnicity and religion was no longer a matter of debate among serious historians. Vermes was far from the first with this program, but it was his voice that set the tone for this generation.

So it is with the greatest respect that I offer the following criticism: not only is it beyond the capability of any person to read any narrative empty of prejudice, Jews and Christians cannot and should not attempt to do so with narratives that are so laden with the baggage of misinterpretation. This is not to suggest a resignation to hopeless subjectivity; neither do I suggest that we

abandon the rigors of historical discipline. My point is that the closest we can come to reading the narratives of Jesus “objectively” is when we acknowledge our prejudices, including those related to our religious heritage. Christians and Jews cannot check their religious identities at the door on their way to the roundtable discussion of history. Moreover, they should not be asked to do so.³

Jon Levenson has helpfully argued that objectivity is “a necessary ideal,” even if it cannot be achieved absolutely.⁴ To an extent, personal biases (including those that stem from our faith commitments) can be bracketed. We must be willing to follow our research to conclusions that have not been pre-scripted by our faith communities. Although, according to Levenson, such “bracketing” must not be confused with the illusion that these prejudices do not exist.⁵ The primary obligation of the historian is honesty, with both the data before us and the impact that our choices make in shaping our collective identities.

Generation after generation of Christians and Jews has chosen different histories to remember. Even when these histories have overlapped, we have repeatedly selected our memories divergently.⁶ We have employed these memories in service to distinctly different rituals and calendars—often to the detriment of the other. Because memory shapes identity, by choosing to remember differently Jews and Christians have become aliens in this process. With this in mind, Jewish and Christian historians will do well to lay bare our prejudices and be willing to question which of them have the potential to harm. Conversely, historians must retain those commitments that reinforce the collective identities of their people, especially when our collective identities are met with the crises of cultural amnesia. According to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, this is nothing short of a moral obligation:

The burden of building a bridge to his people remains with the historian. I do not know for certain that this will be possible. I am convinced only that first the historian must truly desire it and then try to act accordingly [. . .] What historians choose to study and write about is obviously part of the problem. The notion that everything in the past is worth knowing “for its own sake” is a mythology of modern historians, as is the lingering suspicion that conscious responsibility toward the living concerns of the group must result in history that is less scholarly or “scientific.”

Confronted with the problem of the loss of collective memory (and thus the loss of collective identity), Yerushalmi asks, “Who, then, can be expected to step into the breach, if not the historian? Is it not both his chosen and appointed task to restore the past to us all?”⁷ Perhaps this description aggrandizes the task of the historian. But—and this is especially true of the history between Jews and Christians—there is a greater danger in belittling the damage done by misinterpretations of Jesus over the centuries.

Some of our prejudices are survival mechanisms that protect the boundaries of our collective identities. We will do well to ask whether these serve a purpose in the modern world. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Some of our prejudices represent the very heart of our collective identities. It is the historian's responsibility to have an eye to such decisions and realize that we are not isolated arbiters in this endeavor.

For this reason the authors of this book write not only as scholars of the history and legacy of Jesus but also as Jews and Christians. Each author has been asked to illuminate an aspect of Jesus' history or legacy and suggest talking points for Jewish-Christian dialogue. You will see that these authors represent the finest and most disciplined of their field and that they have not sacrificed any rigor in service to this project.

Educating Ourselves about the Jewish Jesus

Jesus research now represents something of a common ground between Jewish and Christian scholarship. While the name of Christ has long been wielded as a divisive force, we now see Jesus situated in the religion and culture of his birth, in conversation, debate, and polemic with fellow Jews. Remarkably, there has been very little use of this consensus for contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In her recent essay, "Jesus from a Jewish Perspective," Sybil Sheridan claims that "this [scholarly] trend has made no impact at all on the beliefs and practices of the Jewish faithful." While acknowledging that Christianity has shaped Judaism significantly since its inception, her claim is that "Judaism exists—or at least, thinks it exists—without reference to the person of Jesus, and that studies that show the opposite are rare and recent."⁸ Sheridan's assessment is indicative of two related rifts that have had tragic consequences: (1) that between Jews and Christians and (2) that between Christian history and doctrine.

While the so-called "historical Jesus" of scholarly construction is almost entirely unknown to non-academic Jews, the phrase "Christ Killers" is notorious.⁹ For many Jews and Christians, the name Christ is set in antithesis to Judaism. The average person may know that Jesus was Jewish, but when this fact is treated trivially, it does very little to reframe two thousand years of anti-Jewish Christology.¹⁰

Modern Judaism (of all ilk) has, in large part, retreated from religious contact with Christians. Fear of sinister motives has led to a history of ignorance on both sides. Sheridan's claim that Judaism "thinks it exists" without reference to the person of Jesus is telling. Ironically, Jesus may be the most influential historical figure in western history, but Jews and Christians alike know very little about him: Jews because of disinterest, and Christians

because Jesus is deceptively familiar. In either case, the charge of ignorance is only helpful when heard internally. Peter Ochs writes, “This veil of ignorance may once have served the purposes of Jewish self-definition. It is no longer wise or tenable.”¹¹ As a Christian, I must echo a similar indictment of general Christian ignorance.

Christians need to hear from recent research that Jesus was not a Christian. He never converted to Christianity. His Judaism was not his “cultural background,” as if he was raised a Jew but then became something else. Nor is Jesus’ relationship to Judaism simply a matter of ethnicity. From a historical perspective, Jesus’ actions are only intelligible once he is understood as a Jew who remained a Jew. It is equally important for Christians to hear that such affirmations do not in any way degrade Christianity. There must be some continuity between the “historical Jesus” and the figure venerated in the New Testament.¹² Importantly, one of the most obvious continuities here is that the Jesus of the New Testament—the Son of God—is Jewish.

For all of the tension that existed between Jews and gentiles in the New Testament, Jesus was never portrayed as a Roman, or a Greek, or an Egyptian gentile. From the very beginning of Christian worship, Jews and gentiles were called to recognize and venerate a Jewish messiah. New Testament scholars believe that Rom. 1:3–4 (cf. 2 Tim. 2:8) contains our earliest surviving Christian creed. This creed is generally considered to be a pre-Pauline creed taken from primitive Christianity.¹³ Here Paul confesses that Jesus “came from David’s seed according to the flesh; who was established the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.” The fact of Jesus’ flesh and blood identity within Israel is at the very heart of Christianity. Even the episodes that are most doubted as historically plausible portray Jesus as a Jew.¹⁴ Finally, as Jesus walked and talked among his contemporaries, he was chiefly concerned for the welfare of the people of Israel. Those of us who take Jesus’ “Lordship” seriously must take seriously the concerns of the human Jesus.

Good interfaith dialogue seeks to replace ignorance with education. To this end, Jews and Christians who are open and interested in authentic dialogue will be helped by discussions of Jesus’ Jewishness. The goal here is not to find common ground at the expense of our many religious differences. The goal is simply to allow this education to inform our dialogue. Both sides must ask difficult questions both of themselves and of the other. Thus we must be well equipped with informed talking points.

Chapters at a Glance

This book is divided into four parts: (1) the New Testament Jesus and exclusionary boundaries, (2) early Jewish and gentile perspectives of Jesus,

(3) Jesus research before and after German National Socialism, and (4) Jesus in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The first three of these parts consist of chapters written with particular topics in mind and conclude with talking points. Part four responds to the previous chapters and concludes with a jointly written reflection.

Leonard Greenspoon's chapter explores the gains and losses of translating the New Testament in ways that eliminate anti-Jewish/anti-Semitic readings. By analyzing recent attempts to do so, he demonstrates that once the anti-Semitic elements are erased from the tradition, Jesus' original ethnicity, religion, and worldview (indeed, his very identity) are further obscured. Greenspoon ultimately suggests that translators must continue to keep the problems of anti-Jewish readings present to mind but must do so cautiously.

Joel Lohr's chapter discusses Jesus' eschatological portrait of sheep and goats in Matthew 25. He argues that the best reading of this oft debated passage is one that situates it within the concerns of first-century Jewish eschatology in general and a Jewish election ethic in particular. Within these milieus, Lohr argues that this vision of judgment describes the division of "gentiles" who have met Jewish standards of charity and those who have not. Thus his reading stands contrary to many traditional Christian readings that see this division as that between Christians and non-Christians. This reading, argues Lohr, suggests a more nuanced and perhaps less uniform New Testament soteriology, one that might help Christians to appreciate their indebtedness to Jewish visions of the world to come.

Anne Lapidus Lerner's chapter offers a close reading and literary analysis of Jesus' episode with the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Reading from the concerns of modern Jewish women's studies, Lerner analyzes the stories presented by Matthew and Mark side by side. She calls attention to the dismissive, derogatory, and dehumanizing words of Jesus in Mark that become still harsher in Matthew. Moreover, Lerner observes that these stories diminish the voice of this nameless woman and enclose hers with the frame of the man's voice. At the same time, this woman occupies a remarkable exception within the Gospels and becomes the "hero of the story" for Lerner. Lerner carefully and respectfully suggests that interfaith dialogue requires honest criticism of one's own faith texts, especially those that fail to affirm the humanity of the other.

Michael Cook's chapter addresses ten anomalies in Mark's treatment of the Jewish leaders (chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees), and argues that all can be resolved simultaneously by a single hypothesis. His determination that Mark's portraits of these groups are artificial raises the sobering problem of their impact on Matthew, Luke, and later Christian writers and preachers, and thus also on the well-being of Jews throughout the ages.

Donald Senior's chapter suggests that while Matthew must be understood as a Christian narrative written for a Jewish-Christian audience, it provides glimpses of the life of Jesus before he was venerated as Christ. Moreover, Matthew's agenda to situate Jesus within his Jewish context is an overt redaction of the Markan Jesus, but perhaps (at times) a more plausible reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Senior suggests that the Jewish identity of Jesus reminds us of the historical bonds between Christians and Jews. Ultimately, however, it is Jesus' christological identity that remains most problematic for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Matthew's Jesus is at once (paradoxically) Christ of Christianity and Jewish Jesus. It is the faith-appropriation of this (these) identity (identities) that provides both the common ground and the honest recognition of differences needed for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Eyal Regev's chapter argues that Jesus' arrest and trial was due to his action in the temple coupled with his saying about the temple's destruction. He argues that these elements, seen from Roman and Sadducean perspectives, would have provided sufficient warrant for Jesus' arrest and trial. In light of this, Regev rejects the idea that Jesus was arrested and tried as a result of any messianic claims. Moreover, such claims probably do not reflect the historical claims of Jesus.

My chapter argues that while it is common for Jesus historians to attribute the "First Quest" to Hermann Samuel Reimarus, critical evaluations of the life of Jesus began much, much earlier. I argue that recent surveys of the Jesus "Quests" have made a misstep in following the lead of Albert Schweitzer in this respect. Moreover, I suggest that we commonly see the topic of Jesus' Jewishness emerge from Jewish-Christian dialogue in late antiquity and medieval periods. My chapter also explores the influences on anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism on modern Jesus historians.

Dagmar Winter's chapter explains four (sometimes overlapping) motives of Protestant scholars to disassociate Jesus from Judaism. She demonstrates that the history of Jesus research from Luther onward both consciously and unwittingly painted the portrait of a Jesus dissimilar to Judaism. This agenda, she argues, is fourfold. Winter argues that the historical Jesus became dissimilar to first-century Judaism in the minds of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians because of the aims of (1) European anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, (2) Protestantism's projection of Reformation disputes onto first-century Judaism, (3) the focus of European and British historiography on "genius" in history, and (4) Dialectical Theology's emphasis on the Christ of Faith at the expense of Jesus of History.

Gerd Theissen's chapter provides a window into the presuppositions and agendas of Jesus research in Germany leading to and through the years of National Socialism. He distances his historical method both from the "German Christians" who attempted to create an Aryan Jesus and from others

who attempted to show Jesus as a Jew who transcended Judaism. Theissen argues that Jesus must be located in the very center of Judaism with regard to his message but might also be called “A Marginal Jew” with regard to his radical lifestyle.

The responses by James Dunn and Amy-Jill Levine dialogue with some of the points raised in the previous chapters and reflect on these topics. Dunn’s response deals with each chapter’s contributions, critiquing the exegetical, historical, and dialogical contributions of each one. He does so as a committed participant of historical Jesus research and Jewish-Christian dialogue from a Christian perspective. Levine’s response critiques the parameters delineated and assumed by the authors and editors of the project. She does so as a committed participant in historical Jesus research and Jewish-Christian dialogue from a Jewish perspective. These responses model Jewish-Christian dialogue in at least three ways: (1) both approach the topic with informed questions and self-awareness; (2) neither equivocates the important differences between Jews and Christians; (3) both are attentive to the literary details, historical context(s), and practical impact of their study; they expect this from themselves and from the other participants in this dialogue.

Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner round out this book with a jointly written conclusion. They helpfully move the discussion beyond “Jesus” and widen the scope to the traditional truth claims of Judaism and Christianity. Rather than attempting to find simplistic or superficial commonalities between the two, they highlight the ways in which these two traditions have parted ways. Chilton and Neusner then offer a way forward for recognizing and analyzing the many analogues between Judaism and Christianity.

The authors and editors of this book hope to model a dialogue that deals honestly and reflectively with the distinctive and (sometimes) analogous characteristics of our traditions. The choice of Jesus as an entry point, we readily acknowledge, is only one avenue for mutual understanding. It is one, however, that requires much more exploration. We hope that this book will be a step closer to historical, exegetical, and theological study done side by side and to mutual benefit.