

# Jewish Perceptions of Jesus

Susanna Heschel (discussion to be continued in the next edition).

What greater theological intimacy could exist between two religions than to have the founder of one be a pious member of the other? Yet like all intimacies, tensions can easily arise: to whom does Jesus belong, to the Jews or the Christians? Who was he, a loyal Jew or the founder of the new religion, Christianity?

For two thousand years, Jews rejected the claim that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the dogmatic claims about him made by the Church Fathers – that he was born of a virgin, the son of God, part of a divine Trinity, and was resurrected after his death. Why Christians chose to form a religion about a preacher from the Galilee has long puzzled his fellow Jews. Was Jesus a pious Jew whose followers invented a religion about him after his death? Or was Jesus a wicked Jew who urged his followers to break with their Judaism? Who, indeed, was the real founder of Christianity – Jesus or Paul? How did Jesus, a Jew, become Christ, the incarnate God worshipped by Christians?

For two thousand years, a central wish of Christianity was to be the object of desire by Jews, whose conversion would demonstrate their acceptance that Jesus had fulfilled their own biblical prophecies. Until the last two centuries, however, Jews actually paid relatively little attention to the figure of Jesus, and what they wrote was for internal consumption. Jewish discussions of Jesus in antiquity and the Middle Ages were not read by Christians, nor were they part of the formal Jewish-Christian disputations held in medieval Europe, which concentrated on doctrinal differences. In those internal Jewish discussions of Jesus, the tone was primarily one of mockery. The Toldot Yeshu, a purported life of Jesus composed by Jews in antiquity, follows the gospel narratives of his life, but inverts their significance. For example, Jesus' miracles are acknowledged to have

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occurred, but are attributed to ill-gotten sorcery techniques he learned in Egypt, or to his infiltration of the Temple's holy of holies where he allegedly stole the secret name of God. Jesus is presented as deceitful and self-serving, but without an intention of starting a new religion. The Sefer Nizzahon, a late thirteenth-century anthology of anti-Christian polemics, assumes a similar tactic, ridiculing the gospels' claims to fulfill Old Testament prophecies and presenting Jesus as a sinner who deliberately violated Jewish law.

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Underlying Jewish explanations of Jesus lies a political agenda: explaining to Jews how a disreputable Jesus managed to launch a religion that ultimately became far more powerful than Judaism.

Other medieval Jewish texts, written for an audience larger than the Jewish world, present Jesus as a pious Jew who made no claim to divinity. Profiat Duran's (d. 1414) examination of the gospels led him to conclude that Jesus made no claims to being divine and simply demanded adherence to the Torah. Maimonides (1135-1204) interprets Christianity and Islam as part of the divine plan of preparing the world for redemption by bringing knowledge of God to the heathen, thus making them handmaidens of the Jewish mission, even while he views Jesus himself as a "wicked heretic." Yet the political agenda is just as sharp when Jesus is presented positively. If Jesus was a devout Jew, Christianity is ultimately a theological distortion introduced by Paul and the church fathers. At best, Christianity is subservient to Judaism, spreading its message of monotheism to the heathens. In the case of the Toldot Yeshu, Jesus is the deliberate deceiver of his followers, whereas if Jesus, according to Profiat Duran, adhered to Jewish law, Christians who believe he was their messiah or lord have simply been deceived.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, the tone and volume of Jewish discussions of Jesus change. Emancipation and Enlightenment, with their promise of Jewish entry into a secularizing Christian society, elicited a positive Jewish interest in Jesus not out of appreciation for Christianity, but as a tool to justify Judaism. For example, the noted Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn sought to win Christian tolerance of Judaism by reminding his audience of Jesus' Jewishness: "Jesus of Nazareth himself observed not only the law of Moses, but also the ordinances of the rabbis; and whatever seems to contradict this in the speeches and acts ascribed to him appears to do so only at first glance. Closely examined, everything is in complete agreement not only with Scripture, but also with the tradition..... And you, dear brothers and fellow men, who follow the teachings of Jesus, should you find fault with us for doing what the founder of your religion did himself, and confirmed by his authority?"

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The emphasis on Jesus' faithfulness to Judaism initially had to proceed with caution. Mendelssohn writes in an unpublished note in 1770, "It is a disgrace that we should reproach Socrates and Plato because they were pagans! Was this a flaw in their morals? And Jesus a Jew? -- And what if, as I believe, he never wanted to give up Judaism? One can only imagine where this remark would lead me." Into dangerous waters, no doubt, given Christian views at the time toward Judaism. The Jewishness of Jesus was known, but not to be publicised.

The rise of liberal Protestantism, with its quest for the historical Jesus and its claim that to be a Christian means to have the faith of Jesus, rather than the religion of dogma about Jesus, was one of the historical factors that encouraged Jewish theologians of the nineteenth century to contribute to New Testament scholarship. Starting



with Abraham Geiger and continuing with Heinrich Graetz, Levi Herzfeld, Joseph Derenbourg, Leo Baeck, Joseph Eschelbacher, and Felix Perles, among others, the Second Temple period took a position of prominence in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, not only to elucidate developments in early Judaism, but to demonstrate how early Christian texts can be clarified with reference to Jewish sources, particularly rabbinic texts.

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Yet in arguing that Jesus was a Jew who can best be understood by studying the gospel texts in the context of Jewish sources, these Jewish historians were not simply building a bridge between the two religions, linked by the Jewish Jesus. Rather, they attempted a more radical agenda: developing a counterhistory of the prevailing Christian theological version of Christianity's origins and influence. The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* did not merely want the study of Judaism to be added to the curriculum, but wanted the study of Judaism to radically revise the established view of Christian origins, in an effort to resist and even overthrow the standard portrayal of Western history. At the heart of the West, according to the new German-Jewish historiography, stood not classical Greek or Roman civilization, nor Aryan culture, nor the New Testament, but the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. It was those texts, not Greece, that produced the great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and laid the foundations for the West. Even modernity, Jewish historians argued, with its claims to secularised, scientific forms of knowing and its insistence on tolerance and diversity, was to be understood as the product of Judaism, not Christianity. After all, while Christianity demanded belief in established dogma, Judaism permitted freedom of belief and required only ethical behaviour.

The initial step taken by Jewish historians was to redefine the nature of Judaism during the era when Christianity developed. Was it a dessicated religion that required the

radical rejection led by Christianity? How did the Jew Jesus lead to the dominance of Christianity in Western civilisation?

In Isaac M. Jost's narrative of Jewish history, written in the 1820s, the Pharisees are presented as narrow-minded and hypocritical, responsible for their own destruction and for Jews turning away to Christianity. By contrast, thirty years later, Abraham Geiger, one of the founders of Reform Judaism, inaugurated a new era of scholarship with his magnum opus, the *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel*, published in 1857, one of the most important works of Jewish scholarship of that century. Geiger defined two tendencies in early Judaism, Pharisaic and Sadducean, a liberal and a conservative proclivity, respectively. The Pharisees, far from being the figures of hypocrisy depicted in the New Testament, attempted to liberalize and democratize halakha, Jewish religious law, to make its practice easier. The Sadducees, the priests of the Jerusalem Temple, by contrast, represented the narrow interests of the priestly aristocratic elite seeking to preserve its privileges by a conservative reading of Jewish law.

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Jesus himself, according to Geiger, was part of the liberalising Pharisaic movement of his day. In a book on Jewish history that he published in the 1860s, a passage that became notorious among Protestant theologians declared: “He [Jesus] was a Jew, a Pharisaic Jew with Galilean colouring -- a man who shared the hopes of his time and who believed that these hopes were fulfilled in him. He did not utter a new thought, nor did he break down the barriers of nationality.... He did not abolish any part of Judaism; he was a Pharisee who walked in the way of Hillel.” After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Sadducees were left without a Temple to conduct their priestly worship. Rather than join their own enemies, the Pharisees, Geiger argues, the Sadducees were drawn to the early Christian movement, and they brought their old polemics with them, reflected in passages such as Matthew 23.

Christianity was not founded by Jesus, Geiger argues, but by Paul, who brought the Jewish monotheism taught by Jesus to the pagan world, where it became corrupted by pagan thought and led to non-Jewish doctrines such as the trinity. Where could Christians today find the actual faith of Jesus – Pharisaic Judaism? Geiger's answer: in the Reform Judaism that Geiger was bringing into existence, a comparable Pharisaic liberalization of Judaism.

Geiger's extensive scholarly examination of Christian origins, especially the figure of Jesus, should be understood not as an effort at assimilation, but, in light of postcolonial theory, as an attempt to subvert Christian hegemony and establish a new position for Judaism within European history and thought. In arguing that Jesus said and did nothing new or original, but was simply one of the numerous liberal Pharisees of first-century Palestine, Geiger was enacting a theological revolt against Christian hegemony and claims to supersession. Both Christianity and Islam had derived their most important teachings from Judaism, he argued in a book entitled, *What Did Mohammed Take from Judaism?*, and at their inception both Christianity and Islam intended nothing more than the spread of Jewish ideas to the pagan world, making them majdservants to the great religious genius of Judaism.

The conclusion was not simply that Judaism had exerted an influence on Christianity and Islam, but that both religions were little more than extensions of Judaism.

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