
Foreword

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This book poses a deceptively simple question: Can a consideration of Jesus' Jewishness benefit Jewish-Christian dialogue? The answer seems obvious: yes, of course. The very notion of a Jewish Jesus signals the significant common ground shared between Judaism and Christianity. Acknowledgment of this common ground should enhance the mutual understanding and respect that dialogue is intended to foster.

As the essays in this volume illustrate, however, neither the question nor the answer is as straightforward as it may appear. What does it mean to say that Jesus was Jewish? That he was born into a Jewish family? Would that also include everything that flows logically from that one fact—that he lived within a Jewish society and therefore observed Jewish law to the same extent and in the same ways as those around him, that he shared his community's sensibilities, values, and concerns? If so, what happened to transform him from a Galilean carpenter to the focus of worship of a world religion which has shaped the lives of countless individuals and the history, culture, and laws of numerous countries? Was it something he did or said? Or the things that were said about him and done in his name? Some combination of these and other factors?

Further, what does Jewish-Christian dialogue entail, and what does it accomplish? Participants in dialogue groups often discuss the beliefs and values that Jews and Christians have in common. They may study with and learn about their Jewish or Christian counterparts, and perhaps most important, they may develop friendships and a sense of comfort with those who

come from different points of view. But anyone who has participated in Jewish-Christian dialogue groups or activities will attest that they do not attract either Jews or Christians from across the full spectrum of their respective faith communities. While there are many Jewish and Christian clergy and laypeople who are committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue, it remains an activity that is marginal to the lives of most Jews and Christians. In addition to the personal benefit and enhanced knowledge that dialogue participants may experience, might one also wish for a broader impact on the relationships between Jews and Christians, Jewish and Christian leaders, and Jewish and Christian organizations?

Lurking beneath the question of whether Jesus' Jewishness can benefit Jewish-Christian dialogue are two important observations. The first is that the symmetry implied in the very term *Jewish-Christian dialogue* is misleading, at least to some extent. The fact that Jesus was Jewish is not germane to many of the ways in which Jews live out and express their Jewish identities, including the beliefs and practices of Judaism as a religious system. Nor do Jews "need" to understand Christianity in order to understand the Jewish Scriptures, Jewish practice, or Jewish law. But where Jews do need to engage with Christians is in the understanding of Jewish history and in coping with the dominant, Christian-influenced culture in which many Jews live. Without understanding something about Christians and Christianity, Jews and other non-Christians in the Americas, Europe, and many other parts of the world are unable to understand their neighbors, their public holidays, their movies, and their presidential debates.

The second observation is more pointed: whether overtly acknowledged or not, the subject that matters most to most participants in Jewish-Christian dialogue is anti-Semitism. It is the history of Christian anti-Semitism and, most urgently, the role that Christian anti-Semitism may have played over many centuries in laying the groundwork for the Holocaust that most often drives Jewish-Christian dialogue. This in itself creates another asymmetry. Jews and Christians are not equal partners in the dialogue. There is often a perceived need for Christian participants not only to understand the powerful impact of anti-Semitism on Jewish identity and experience but also to apologize for it; this is matched by the perceived need for the Jewish participants to hear out and accept the apology.

This dynamic is evident not only anecdotally but also in published manifestos. The 2002 document "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People," published by a group of prominent Christian scholars and clergy from a range of Christian denominations, acknowledges that "For most of the past two thousand years, Christians have erroneously portrayed Jews as unfaithful, holding them collectively responsible for the death of Jesus and therefore accursed by God."

The document rejects this accusation, and “repent[s] of this teaching of contempt.”¹ The 2002 declaration *Dabru Emet* (“speak the truth”), by a group of prominent Jewish rabbis and scholars, acknowledges the recent “dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations” brought about by the statements by “official Church bodies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant” expressing remorse for Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism and pledging to reform “Christian teaching and preaching . . . so that they acknowledge God’s enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.” *Dabru Emet* absolves Christianity of responsibility for the Holocaust but acknowledges that “Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out.”²

The difficult matter of Christian anti-Semitism underlies not only the enterprise of Jewish-Christian dialogue but also the matter of Jesus’ Jewishness. Jesus’ Jewishness would not be a controversial topic were it not for the fact that for centuries he was understood as standing over against Judaism and as the universal divinely sent savior, the Son of God, who by definition cannot be attached to any particular ethnic group, let alone the Jews, who refused to believe in him and whose leadership opposed him unto death. Although Jews and Christians have been in conversation with one another in various eras and locations over the past two millennia, sometimes even harmoniously so, modern Jewish-Christian dialogue very likely would not have come into existence were it not for the Holocaust and the recognition among some Christian churches of a level of complicity, whether intentional or not.

It is not surprising, then, that the question of Christian anti-Semitism is addressed, usually directly, in some cases indirectly, in each of the essays in this volume. The volume has two underlying assumptions: that Jesus was a Jew and that Jewish-Christian dialogue is a good thing. Historically speaking, the first point is incontrovertible. Ethically and morally, the second point also seems assured; any activity that leads to mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation between Jews and Christians is worth fostering. In both cases, the issue of anti-Semitism must be raised, not only with respect to recent events, but in the very sources for the life of Jesus himself: the New Testament.

One approach is to suggest that the anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism arises in the interpretation of Scripture, not in Scripture itself. Joel Lohr, for example, argues that the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is not about the division between Christians and non-Christians, as it is often read, but between gentiles who have met Jewish standards and those who have not. In this case, negative perceptions of Judaism can be attributed not to the Gospel writers but to the history of interpretation; this approach

excises the problem, neatly and without bloodshed, using the sharp knife of historical-critical exegesis.

But what to do about the passages that more directly put Jews and Judaism in a highly negative light? One obvious example can be found in the Passion narratives, which portray the Jewish leadership and/or the Jewish crowds as morally if not literally culpable of Jesus' death, thereby engendering the threatening chant of "Christ-killers" to which many Jews are exposed even today. Michael Cook addresses this point by arguing that some aspects of the Passion accounts have no basis in history, in which case the deicide charge itself is also unhistorical. Cook's is a minority view, even among interpreters highly sympathetic to Judaism, as Dunn's response in this volume shows. But even if Cook is right, what is one to do with these passages? One might be inclined simply to ignore them were it not for the fact that they are translated into virtually every language known to humankind. In their contributions to this volume, Leonard Greenspoon and Amy-Jill Levine measure the gains and losses of translating the New Testament in ways that draw attention to the Jewishness of Jesus, his family, and his earliest followers. Both attempt to eliminate or at least attenuate anti-Jewish/anti-Semitic readings. Whether translation should play down the problem, or draw attention to it, remains a difficult question.

Although the "quest of the historical Jesus" (Albert Schweitzer's famous term) is most often attempted as an exercise in objective historical scholarship, reconstructions of Jesus' life and message often project onto this first-century Jew the ideals and aspirations of times and places far removed from his own. As Anthony Le Donne's essay notes, in eras when anti-Semitism was acceptable, or at least tolerable (and even when it was not), lives of Jesus have often betrayed an anti-Jewish bent. This point is reinforced by the essays by Dagmar Winter, who explores the role of anti-Semitism in the attempts of Protestant scholars to disassociate Jesus from Judaism, and Gerd Theissen, who focuses on the presuppositions and agendas of Jesus research in Germany during the Nazi era.

Anti-Semitism, however, is a painful topic, and important as it is to Jewish-Christian dialogue, it should not become the sole item on the agenda. It is no wonder that in the effort to promote harmony and mutual respect, dialogue as such, and many of the essays in this volume, strive to find the common ground between Jews and Christians. But, as Donald Senior notes, Jewish-Christian dialogue needs not only common ground but also honest recognition of difference, including theological difference. Senior comments that while the Jewish identity of Jesus reminds us of the historical bonds between Christians and Jews, there is no way to smooth over one crucial difference: Jesus' christological identity. In addition to the acknowledgment of difference between Jews and Christians, dialogue must also include painful

conversation within each group. Anne Lapidus Lerner's study of the Canaanite woman in Mark 7 and Mark 15 from the perspective of modern Jewish women's studies points to the need to accept that each of our religious traditions includes texts and ideas that fail to affirm the humanity of the other.

Stripping Jesus of his Jewish identity was a disservice to Jesus, and to Christianity; to the extent that this destructive act both served and promoted anti-Semitism it was also a disservice—to put it mildly—to Jews and to Christians as well. By drawing attention to the question of Jesus' identity, the texts from which we construct that identity, and the complex history of Jewish-Christian relations, this book does indeed achieve its goal, which is “to model a dialogue that deals honestly and reflectively with the distinctive and (sometimes) analogous characteristics of our tradition” (page 7). If it can spur more people to engage in thoughtful dialogue, all the better.