

Preface

My first encounter with Jesus goes back many years, to my early childhood. We were a few Jewish kids, seven or eight years old, playing in the park. Along came a group of Catholics from a local parochial school, who taunted us with repeated cries of “Christ killers! Christ killers!” The young priest accompanying the class smiled broadly. His pupils had learned their lesson well.

Even at that tender age, I reasoned that a religion that teaches hatred cannot be any good. I still hold to that belief. Some years later, in graduate school, I put the question to a fellow Ph.D. candidate in history, a Mennonite: how can Christians go on teaching that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion? He answered simply: “But you *did* kill him.” End of story – for one pious Christian, at least.

Among Gentiles who do not openly accuse the Jews of deicide, there seems to be a consensus that Jesus introduced a doctrine superior to Judaism. A Protestant lady attending an interfaith gathering in Geneva was surprised to learn that he had not invented the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself. I explained that it first appeared in the book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18. Just think of the First World War, I

suggested; it ended in 1918. That way, you can't miss. Taken aback, she insisted that Jesus surpassed Jewish morality, since he told his disciples to love their enemies. Do you love your enemies? I asked. No, she admitted, but she was trying. For all I know, she may be trying still.

Atheists seem to share with liberal Protestants the view that Jesus was essentially a great moral innovator. An atheistic colleague (baptized Protestant) once tried to convince me what a wonderful person "J. C." was. My colleague was in good company: R. Travers Herford, the Unitarian minister who did more than any other Christian to rehabilitate the Pharisees, called Jesus "simply the greatest man who ever lived."¹ Richard Dawkins, who proudly denies the existence of God, claims that "Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament." He proposes to create an association called "atheists for Jesus."²

The Jesus story naturally puts the Jews and Judaism in a bad light. Some web sites (fortunately few in number) portray the Jewish people as his sworn enemies, even today. This accusation is usually based on three verses in the New Testament: John 7, 1 and 11, 53-54, plus I Thessalonians 2, 14-16. Yet open anti-Semitism may not be the main problem here. In contemporary culture, Jews are often presented as poor benighted souls who rejected "the greatest man who ever lived" and worship a "cruel ogre" instead. No wonder the *goyim* (Gentiles, non-Jews) tend to look down on us.

To counter any negative impression, Jewish apologists (and some Christian) now present Jesus as a

pious, if sadly misunderstood, Jew. They seem to believe that their efforts will lead to a decline in anti-Semitism. Yet the fact remains that the Jews who actually knew Jesus overwhelmingly rejected his message and that their descendents continue to do so. The message was a simple one: the kingdom of heaven is at hand; and if you accept me as your king, I will ensure that it comes to pass. The prospect of a divine kingdom about to be established on earth certainly had great initial appeal to most Jews in Roman-occupied Judea. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem one fine Sunday in the spring, he received a rapturous welcome. The crowds lining his route prepared the way for him by laying palm branches on the ground and cried, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"³ Five days later, he was dead. His popular following had largely disappeared.

So we are entitled to ask why Jesus was rejected by his compatriots, and why Jews ever since (except for the splinter group that helped to found Christianity) have tended to ignore his doctrine. This is a historical question. History is the science of causality, and it is for the historian to explain what caused the rift between Jesus and his fellow Jews. The great Salo W. Baron, author of a magisterial series of volumes on Jewish history, remarks laconically, "The bulk of the Jews . . . had to oppose Jesus."⁴ But he does not say why, and other Jewish historians prefer to avoid the subject altogether,⁵ leaving it to Bible scholars, theologians and other zealous amateurs.

Contemporary Jews, who are generally unfamiliar with the politics of Jesus's day, are more sensitive to moral issues when dealing with him. Shortly after the Second

World War, a French rabbi, in an effort to dissuade Jews from converting to Christianity, undertook to demonstrate that the ethics and morality of the Gospels are in no way superior to those of Judaism – rather the reverse.⁶ While not entirely free of errors, his book represents a valiant attempt to set the record straight. It has been out of print for more than half a century and does not seem to attract many Jews, even those who read French. France is a predominantly Catholic country, and its Jewish minority no longer feels the need to refute missionary arguments. Since the second Vatican council, the Church of Rome has shown itself to be far more interested in recovering lapsed Catholics than in converting Jews.

The United States, on the other hand, is home to at least 900 evangelical Protestant congregations dedicated to saving the souls of Jews by having them acknowledge Jesus as their true saviour. The evangelicals are convinced that unless all Jews convert, Jesus will not return to fulfill his mission. Their intense missionary activity has led to a defensive reaction among Jews, several of whom have written books explaining how to refute the time-worn claims that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by Hebrew prophesy.⁷ Detailed Biblical exegesis is the main feature of these refutations, which show that Christianity interprets the Hebrew Scriptures in a way totally inconsistent with Jewish tradition. This is true enough, but more is needed: first, a coherent analysis of the Nazarene's ministry and his compatriots' reaction to it; second, an explanation of his moral teachings and their relevance, if any, for the problems of our own day.

To understand both questions, one has to read the New Testament, and especially the Gospels. Despite their many inconsistencies, these narratives provide a key to understanding why Jesus's mission among his fellow Jews, despite some initial successes, eventually failed.⁸ The evangelists faced a daunting task. First, they had to convince their readers that Jesus was indeed the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew prophets. Then, they had to show how popular he was among the people. Here, the "people" are none other than the Jews of Judea, except that the Nazarene's supporters are never referred to in the Gospels as Jews. The "people" become Jews only after he begins to lose popular support; then, nearly all Jews are portrayed his enemies, especially in the gospel according to John. Nonetheless, the Gospels remain a valid historical source – provided that we situate the Jesus story in its true context, that of a Jew and his relation to other Jews at a particular time and place in history.

What follows, then, is a Jewish reading of the Christian Scriptures. Christians read them differently, as they must, in order to seek spiritual inspiration and guidance in their holy book. The more enlightened among them tend to skip the hateful passages and concentrate instead on those of moral worth, not realizing that the latter are all derived from Judaism. Jews are usually discouraged from reading this remarkable work of anti-Jewish propaganda. Rabbis of all persuasions have long assumed that their congregants lack sufficient discernment to approach it critically. The present author ran into such opposition in his youth as a graduate student in history,

when he casually remarked to his local rabbi that Jews could benefit from reading the New Testament. The rabbi, a luminary of Reform Judaism and noted Talmudic scholar, smiled condescendingly and replied, “We don’t want to lose you.”

The rabbi was apparently unaware that the young Ph.D. candidate had already read the New Testament, without being lost to Judaism as a result. He had encountered a Protestant missionary, who gave him a copy of the “Old Testament prophesy edition,” a version replete with references to the Jewish Bible. These are not only prophetic, but include all possible similarities between the two sets of Scripture. Thus, the well-known phrase attributed to Jesus, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you . . .”⁹ bears the footnote, Lev. 19, 18. Yet when we turn to the book of Leviticus, we read simply: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.” There is absolutely nothing here about hating one’s enemy. To the contrary, Jews are exhorted to show kindness and forbearance to those who hate them. “When you encounter your enemy’s ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. When you see the ass of your enemy collapsing under its burden and would prefer not to raise it, you must nonetheless help him to raise it.”¹⁰ And again: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”¹¹ The Jewish reader of Matthew can only conclude that when Jesus claimed that

Judaism teaches hatred, he either was dishonest or simply did not understand the Bible.

The “Old Testament prophesy edition” is available in several languages, including Hebrew. For many years now, the State of Israel has been the target of Christian missionaries who believe that Jesus cannot return to earth until all Jews are reassembled in the Holy Land and accept him as their saviour. They distribute the Hebrew version of the “Old Testament prophesy edition” to impressionable young Israelis in the hope of making converts. An eleven-year-old pupil at a school belonging to the National Religious Party was severely reprimanded by his teacher for having kept his copy. The teacher snatched the book from his hands and burned it in front of the entire class.¹² Such a bigoted approach is all too common in Orthodox Judaism.

Preventing Jews from reading the Christian Scriptures is typical of a certain ghetto mentality which seeks to insulate Jews from Christianity. But the Jesus myth reaches them subliminally through the mass media and films, which portray him as a great hero. British journalist Jonathan Freedland was raised in an observant, kosher home. His Jewish education included regular synagogue attendance and Hebrew classes twice a week. Yet Jesus entered the household through television programs shown during Easter week. “I was watching Robert Powell get crucified when I should have been preparing the Seder table,” he recalls. To this day, he admits being “strangely drawn to the story of Jesus. . . . [it] makes for gripping entertainment.” The Jesus of film

and television is portrayed as “a radical firebrand, whom the powerful want to silence and shut down.”¹³ What could be more appealing to an idealistic young Jew?

In recent times, Reform Judaism in the United States has shown a certain willingness to take on the New Testament. It is the subject of a course given at the Hebrew Union College by Rabbi Michael J. Cook, who has published a book encouraging Jews to “engage,” as he puts it, the Christian Scriptures. He has a positive view of Jesus, calling him “a great teacher of Jewish ethics,” but adds: “He was not the Messiah because he did not bring about independence for the land of Israel from Roman oppression.”¹⁴ A devout Christian would no doubt reply that, yes, Jesus did not liberate Judea, but that is because his own people rejected him as their king. Instead, by giving up his own life, he accomplished something far more remarkable: he redeemed all of humanity from original sin. Of course, if you want to be redeemed, you must first believe in him. Besides, the Christian may well ask: if Jesus was a great teacher of Jewish ethics, why not accept him now?

Most Jews would be at a loss to answer that question. For over a century and a half, liberal Judaism has reclaimed Jesus for the Jewish people and Jewish history. Rabbi Abraham Geiger, a leading founder of the Reform movement in Germany, wrote in 1864 that Jesus was not only a Jew, but a Pharisee as well.¹⁵ This last assertion infuriated Protestant theologians of his time, but has been reaffirmed by other Jewish scholars. Baron notes simply that “Jesus appears as an essentially Pharisaic

Jew.”¹⁶ Some Orthodox Jewish leaders, in the interest of improved relations with Christians, now recognize Jesus as one of their own. American rabbi Irving Greenberg, a Jew of strict observance and an ardent Zionist, is at great pains to emphasize that Jesus was not a false Messiah, but simply a “failed Messiah,” i.e. one “who has the right values and upholds the covenant but does not attain the final goal.”¹⁷ But did he have the right values, and did he uphold the covenant? That is the question under examination here.

Jesus was certainly a Jew, indeed a Jewish nationalist. This has endeared him to many Zionists, beginning with Joseph Klausner, a Jew living in Palestine under the British mandate, whose biography of Jesus appeared (in Hebrew) in the early 1920s. Klausner is quick to note the Nazarene spoke only Aramaic and that Galilee, where he exercised the better part of his ministry, “was the stronghold of the most enthusiastic Jewish patriotism.”¹⁸ If Jesus were alive today, he would obviously be an Israeli and most likely a militant of the religious Right. This is hardly a reason to venerate him. For a time, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon was also hailed by his followers as the King of Israel; but that does not, in itself, qualify him as the Messiah.

So why should Jews in our time try to understand Jesus? As long as Jewish communities lived their separate lives apart from mainstream Christian society, they could safely ignore him. Relations with Gentiles were limited to the business and administrative spheres. Now that Jews participate fully in that society and enjoy friendly relations with Christians, however, allusions to Jesus and the

mythology surrounding him often crop up in everyday conversation. First, there are the trite expressions such as “Touch wood” or “Cross your fingers,” along with superstitions like Friday the thirteenth. More seriously, it is not uncommon to hear the Biblical verse “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,”¹⁹ quoted as if it sanctioned vengeance or reprisal. This is how Jesus interpreted it.²⁰ Yet how many Jews know the true meaning of the original text?

Casual conversations between ordinary Jews and Christians differ greatly from those formal interfaith meetings involving rabbis and members of the Christian clergy. In the latter, everyone is on his best behavior and scrupulously avoids stepping on other people’s toes. Among the laity, the tone is apt to be more direct. “But Jesus is love. You’re not against love, are you?” Or this: “Wouldn’t it be nice if we acted like one big family? After all, most religions are pretty much the same.” Jews tend to brush off such well-meaning remarks without comment; they don’t want to be called party-poopers. Besides, there is usually no rabbi or Jewish academic around to coach them.

The acid test of Judeo-Christian relations is in marriage. Rabbis, especially the Orthodox, see mixed unions as a trap for the Jewish partner. Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, waxes eloquent over what he calls the Judeo-Christian tradition and Judeo-Christian values.²¹ He is especially fond of the “Christmas spirit.”²² At the same time, he is convinced that “out-marriage” will necessarily lead to the demise of

Judaism.²³ We do not share this pessimistic approach. Mixed marriages do not have to result in the absorption of Jews into the great mass of Christendom. Rather, they can serve to lead Christians – not only spouses, but their families and friend – to a better understanding of Judaism. But first, Jews will need a thorough grounding in Judaism themselves, so that they can disentangle fact from fiction in the New Testament. Such is the aim of this essay.
