The Jewishness of Jesus: Facing Some Problems*

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ANY ASSESSMENT OF THE POSITIVE RESULTS of the Second Vatican Council would have to include progress in Christian-Jewish relations. The Council's *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* contains the following statement: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend that mutual understanding which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogues."[1] These words of Vatican II have led many Catholics, especially in the United States, where the largest Jewish community in the world lives and where Judaism is the most prominent non-Christian religion, to explore the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. This movement within Catholicism in turn has given renewed vigor to already existing Protestant-Jewish efforts at mutual understanding.

The agenda for the Christian-Jewish dialogue is quite full. Starting from our own day, it includes the State of Israel, the Holocaust, Christian persecution of Jews, the parting of the ways, and so on back to the beginnings of ancient Israel. A major topic on this agenda has been the Jewishness of Jesus.

There is a basic level on which most Christians and Jews can agree about the Jewishness of Jesus. That Jesus the Jew was born, lived, and died

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[1] *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. W. M. Abbott; New York: America, 1966) 665.

in the land of Israel in what we call the first-century A.D. cannot be doubted. The Jewishness of Jesus' teaching is well summarized by the distinguished German NT scholar, Franz Mussner: Jesus of Nazareth stood for the great religious ideas of Israel as they are found in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition. His teachings on God, obedience to God's will, creation, expiation for sin, covenant, the piety of the poor, the better righteousness, eschatology, and fidelity are consistent with his Jewish heritage. Through Jesus the great heritage of Israel has been mediated to all nations.[2]

The Jewishness of Jesus fascinates both Christians and Jews today. Christians recognize the Jewishness of Jesus as a bridge not only to Jews but also to other Christians. It is a starting-point for conversation, something about which mutual understanding and even agreement seem possible. It connects Christians with the humanity of Jesus and helps them avoid a longtime tendency to docetism. Many Jews, for their part, are putting aside a tradition of defensiveness regarding Jesus and engaging in a kind of reclamation or "bringing home" of Jesus as Jew.[3]

The Jewishness of Jesus is bringing Christians and Jews together. The paradox, however, is that what most obviously still divides Christians and Jews is their assessment of Jesus. There is, of course, a wide spectrum of views about Jesus in both Christian circles and Jewish circles. Nevertheless, any sampling of opinion about what distinguishes Judaism from Christianity quickly yields the answer, "Jesus."

In the renewed relationship between Christians and Jews, biblical scholars have played a major role. One of the great achievements in religious studies during the past twenty years has been the willingness of scholars from varying religious backgrounds and commitments to work together. And the Jewishness of Jesus has been a major concern in this development.

Attention to the Jewishness of Jesus has also sharpened the problems involved in understanding Jesus. This sharpening of issues is my concern in this paper. As a scholar trained in Second Temple Judaism and as a New Testament specialist, I would like to focus on three methodological difficulties that have emerged from recent study of the Jewishness of Jesus: Judaism

[2] "Der Jude Jesus," *Freiburger Rundbrief* 23 (1971) 3-7; *Traktat über die Juden* (Munich: Kösel, 1979) 183; *Tractate on the Jews: The Significance of Judaism for Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 113. See P. Lapide and U. Luz, *Jesus in Two Perspectives: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

[3] The idea of "reclaiming" or "bringing home" Jesus became prominent with S. Ben Chorin's *Bruder Jesus: Der Nazarener in jüdischer Sicht* (3d ed.; Munich: List, 1970). For a full discussion from an evangelical perspective, see D. A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). A harsh critique of Hagner's work is B. Young, "Jewish Scholarship and Jesus," *Immanuel* 19 (1984-85) 102-6.

in Jesus' time, our sources about Jesus the Jew, and theological assessments of Jesus. My hope is that investigation of these issues will clarify the new shape of the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. This new shape has emerged in part as a result of the labors undertaken in common by Christian and Jewish scholars.

The Jewishness of Jesus in Recent Scholarship

Before taking up these three methodological difficulties, it may be helpful to illustrate what I have described as the new shape of the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. That new shape comes from taking very seriously the Jewishness of Jesus and trying to understand him within the limits of first-century Judaism.

I will first describe in some detail the work of three scholars who explain Jesus' historical setting, intention, and death in the context of first-century Judaism. They are Geza Vermes (a distinguished Jewish specialist in the Dead Sea scrolls, Jewish history, and rabbinic literature), E. P. Sanders (a Christian NT scholar well-known for his contributions to Synoptic and Pauline studies and his work on the character of first-century Judaism), and Harvey Falk (an American rabbi from a very traditional Jewish background). What unites these three very different scholars is their resolute attempt to explain Jesus within the context of Judaism. In offering these summaries, I wish only to illustrate a trend in research on the historical Jesus and to prepare for a more general consideration of methodology. I will not provide detailed critiques of the individual authors.

In his *Jesus the Jew,* Geza Vermes seeks to set the scene of Jesus' activity and determine what kind of Jew he was.[4] Using texts from Josephus' writings and rabbinic literature about Galilee, Vermes places Jesus alongside such charismatic holy men as Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa. Then he examines five christological titles (Prophet, Lord, Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God) with regard to their possible meanings during Jesus' ministry in Galilee and before their development by the early church. In a booklet entitled *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew,* Vermes describes Jesus as a first-century Jewish holy man entirely dedicated to the call for repentance and the coming kingdom of God, as someone uniquely aware of his filial relationship to God and eager to communicate it to others.[5] Although Jesus' charismatic teaching and life-style attracted some Jewish opponents, Jews

[4] G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew. A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

[5] Idem, *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew* (Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1981). See also his *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

did not bear the ultimate responsibility for Jesus' execution: "It was not on a Jewish religious indictment, but on a secular accusation that he was condemned by the emperor's delegate to die shamefully on a Roman cross."[6]

E. P. Sanders's *Jesus and Judaism* is important for its sharp criticism of scholars who refuse to take seriously the Jewishness of Jesus and for its effort to explain Jesus within the confines of first-century Judaism.[7] Describing himself as "a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant," Sanders understands Jesus as an eschatological prophet and focuses on what Jesus did in the Jerusalem temple (see Mark 11:15-19 parr.) and said about the temple (see Mark 13:2; 14:58; parr.). According to Sanders, Jesus' action in the temple symbolized his expectation that God would soon give a new temple from heaven, in line with other Jewish forms of restoration eschatology. Jesus called sinners to accept his promise of the kingdom, without demanding their repentance (which would involve restitution and/or sacrifice). The combination of Jesus' demonstration against the Jerusalem temple and the questionable character of the following that he attracted led to his death at the hands of the Romans (with the urging of at least the Jewish high priests).

In *Jesus the Pharisee,* Harvey Falk situates Jesus in the Pharisaic struggle between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel.[8] He claims that about 20 B.C. the school of Shammai gained control of the Jewish community in Palestine and the Hillelites joined the Essenes. Jesus' background was in the Essene branch of the Pharisaic movement gathered around Hillel. Jesus, according to Falk, remained an Orthodox Jew all his life and never wished his fellow Jews to change any aspect of their traditional faith. What got Jesus into trouble with the regnant Shammaites was his desire to establish a religion for Gentiles on the basis of the seven Noahide commandments (prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, killing, stealing, sexual sins, and eating a limb from a living animal, as well as the obligation to establish courts of justice). Jesus' criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees were really directed only at the school of Shammai and in fact upheld the views of Hillel. Although the Romans executed Jesus, it was the Sanhedrin dominated by the school of Shammai, the Zealots, and violent temple priests who were the prime movers in getting Jesus killed. They did so because they feared that the Romans would embrace Christianity and destroy the temple and the Jewish government (see John 11:47).

[6] *Jesus the Jew,* 37.

[7] E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

[8] H. Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee. A New Look at the Jewishness of Jesus* (New York/ Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985). Though not of the same scholarly caliber as the works of Vermes and Sanders, Falk's book is noteworthy (see *Time* [July 22, 1985] 57) because of the author's Orthodox Judaism, his use of traditional Jewish sources, and the Catholic publisher.

These three scholars situate Jesus in different contexts: Galilean charismatic Hasidism (Vermes), apocalyptic restoration movements (Sanders), and Pharisaism with its debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai (Falk). They attribute different intentions to Jesus: calling for repentance in light of the coming kingdom and communicating the experience of God as Father (Vermes), preparing for the restoration of Judaism (Sanders), and establishing a new religion for Gentiles on the basis of the seven Noahide commandments (Falk). All three agree that the Roman officials bear ultimate responsibility for Jesus' death but give different reasons why Jesus' Jewish opponents may have collaborated with the Romans: his charismatic style (Vermes), the threat posed to the Jerusalem temple and by the kinds of people that Jesus attracted (Sanders), and Shammaite fears about the new religion for Gentiles that Jesus proposed (Falk).[9]

Judaism in Jesus' Time

There was a time not too long ago when it seemed easy to understand Judaism in Jesus' time. The major sources were the Gospels and the rabbinic corpus. Jews could be divided into two primary groups—Pharisees and Sadducees, with some other shadowy entities such as the Essenes, the Zealots, and the "people of the land" at the margins.

That simple picture of Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' time no longer exists. Perhaps the best known factor in breaking down the old consensus was the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the late 1940s and early 1950s. All of a sudden, we had access to the library of a Jewish religious community organized along quasi-monastic lines and preparing itself for the coming of God's kingdom. The community was quickly and correctly identified as the Essenes, thus leaving the sociological map of Palestinian Judaism relatively intact.

The Qumran discoveries, however, soon led to a full-scale review of other evidence for Second Temple Judaism. We have learned some interesting and important things from this review, though the result can be stated in the following paradox: The more we know, the less we know.[10]

[9] Some significant Christian attempts at dealing with the Jewishness of Jesus include A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); C. Perrot, *Jésus et l'histoire* (Tournai: Desclée, 1979); J. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980).

[10] For a good popular presentation, see M. E. Stone, *Scriptures, Sects and Visions. A Profile of Judaism from Ezra to the Jewish Revolts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). For bibliographic information, see my *The New Testament: A Bibliography* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1985) 193-232.

Among the documents found in the Qumran library,[11] in addition to the sect's own literature, were some of the OT Pseudepigrapha: *1 Enoch, Jubilees,* and *Testaments of the Patriarchs.* Such documents were apparently not composed by the Essenes. Other Jewish groups lay behind them, some of which shared the Qumran sect's keen interest in eschatology. Once a neglected field, study of the OT Pseudepigrapha is now enriched by ample bibliographic resources, critical editions of texts, new translations in various languages, and reliable introductions.[12] This wealth of scholarly resources has furthered the impression of Second Temple Judaism's rich diversity.

Still another piece in the revision of our picture of Palestinian Judaism around the turn of the era has been the growing recognition that Jews had been part of the Hellenistic world since the time of Alexander the Great. From the late fourth century B.C. onward, Jews were using Greek language, economic patterns, military formations, and cultural expressions to some extent. Even the Hasmonean family, which did so much to revitalize Jewish life in the second century B.C. against the inroads of Hellenization, ended up adopting many Hellenistic ways. The upshot of all this is that Palestinian Judaism can now only be seen as part of the wider Greco-Roman world, not as a hermetically sealed Jewish enclave.[13] Meanwhile, the archaeologists and historians have been busy in making our picture even more complicated. Perhaps their most interesting general finding here has been the recognition of regionalism in Palestine at the turn of the era, i.e., that life differed between Galilee and Jerusalem, and even between northern and southern Galilee.[14]

At the same time, there has been an ongoing reassessment of the rabbinic writings. On the one hand, we are now much more cautious in retrojecting into Jesus' day what is found in the Mishna (put in final form around A.D. 200) or the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (from the fourth and fifth

[11] G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Qumran in Perspective* (Cleveland: Collins & World, 1978). For more recent publications, see C. Koester, "A Qumran Bibliography: 1974-84," *BTB* 15 (1985) 110-20.

[12] J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985); H. F. D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (New York: Clarendon, 1984). For a general introduction to this literature and the Qumran writings, see M. E. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

[13] M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism. Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959).

[14] See E. M. Meyers and J. F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity: The Social and Historical Setting of Palestinian Judaism and Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); S. Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E. A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980); R. A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements around the Time of Jesus," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 471-95; idem, "'Like One of the Prophets of Old': Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 435-63.

centuries), and still more cautious with regard to what is found in the midrashic collections. On the other hand, there is greater appreciation of the creativity and coherent vision of the rabbis as they worked out their vision of Jewish life in the second and third centuries, and more than a little doubt whether it is proper to look upon them as the lineal continuation of the Pharisaic movement.[15] Meanwhile, there has arisen a fairly large body of scholars who maintain that the targums are witnesses to the way in which the Hebrew Bible was read and interpreted in Jesus' time, though some serious methodological difficulties stand in the way of such claims.[16]

The more we know, the less we know. The "more" includes the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the restudy of the OT Pseudepigrapha, the recognition of Palestine as part of the Hellenistic world and of distinct cultural regions in the land of Israel, and the revised picture of the rabbinic writings. A good deal more is known about Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' day than was known forty years ago. But in another sense we *know less.* Or at least we are less confident about simple and neat pictures. What emerges from all this research is a variety of Judaisms and some doubt about whether one can speak of any center or core. The most obvious candidates as the core, of course, are the Torah, the Jerusalem temple, and the land itself. Yet even here there is debate about whether and to what extent these can be taken as unifying factors for the various Judaisms.[17]

In light of these developments during the past forty years in the study of Palestinian Judaism, the obvious question is this: What was the Jewish context of Jesus? It is not surprising that, in accord with the new developments, there have emerged new approaches to the context of Jesus. The following list mentions first an image of Jesus and secondly Jewish or other background material proposed in recent years as a basis for the image: eschatological prophet (apocalyptic writings),[18] political revolutionary (reports about

[15] J. Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1981). See also S. J. D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Sectarianism," *HUCA* 55 (1984) 27-53.

[16] M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1966); *Targum and Testament* (Shannon: Irish University; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1972); R. Le Déaut, *The Message of the New Testament and the Aramaic Bible* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982); A. D. York, "The Dating of Targumic Literature," *JSJ* 5 (1974) 49-62; S. A. Kaufman, "On Methodology in the Study of the Targums and Chronology," *JSNT* 23 (1985) 117-24.

[17] See the debate between N. J. McEleney, "Orthodoxy in Judaism of the First Christian Century," *JSJ* 4 (1973) 19-42, and D. E. Aune, "Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism? A Response to N. J. McEleney," *JSJ* 7 (1976) 1-10.

[18] Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism.*

rebels against Rome),[19] magician (Greek magical papyri),[20] Essene (Dead Sea scrolls),[21] Galilean charismatic (rabbinic accounts),[22] Hillelite (Hillel-Shammai debates),[23] and Galilean rabbi (targums).[24]

The list could be extended. I have stopped at seven images and backgrounds. Some of these I take more seriously (eschatological prophet, Galilean charismatic) than others. Nevertheless, there are at least shreds of evidence for each image and background. The point in making such a list is to illustrate how difficult it is to be exact about the precise Jewish context of Jesus. The root of the problem is that the new discoveries and the restudy of already available material have revealed a much more complicated and diverse picture of Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' time than was imagined forty or fifty years ago. Since we know more now than we did then, we also know how little we do really know about Judaism in Jesus' time and how hard it is to put together what we already know in a coherent package.

So the first methodological problem pertaining to Jesus in his Jewish context is the nature of Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' time; it appears to have been quite diverse and multifaceted. Our increased understanding of its diversity has made it even more difficult to be sure precisely what kind of Jew Jesus was and against which historical background we should try to understand him.

Sources about Jesus the Jew

The second methodological problem involved in placing Jesus the Jew in his context concerns the nature of the ancient sources that speak about Jesus. On the Jewish side, there is not much. The few talmudic passages and the Toledot Jeshu tradition are fascinating examples of religious parody and polemic but tell us practically nothing of any value for understanding Jesus in the first century A.D.[25] The description of Jesus by Josephus in *Ant.* 18.3.3. §63-64 may well be a later interpolation into the text. At least some of its

[19] S. F. G. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots. A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Scribner's; Manchester, UK: University of Manchester, 1967); H. Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1973; New York: Taplinger, 1981).

[20] M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York/San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

[21] Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee.*

[22] Vermes, *Jesus the Jew.*

[23] Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee.*

[24] B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible. Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984).

[25] For a recent survey, see J. Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978).

statements ("he was the Messiah . . . on the third day he appeared to them restored to life") sound like the products of a Christian editor.[26]

The most extensive ancient sources about Jesus are the four Gospels. These Gospels are complicated documents for twentieth-century historians. The Gospels describe Jesus of Nazareth, who exercised a public ministry of preaching and healing and was put to death as "King of the Jews" around A.D. 30. But these Gospels were written some forty to sixty years after Jesus' death. They presupposed the Easter event. They spoke mainly to those who already believed in the decisive significance of Jesus. They were expressed in such a way as not only to describe Jesus in his original setting but also to address the problems facing the Christian communities of a later time. Between the time of Jesus and the final composition of the Gospels, the traditions about Jesus were handed on in a complex and probably unsystematic process and were reshaped in light of the needs and concerns of various Christian groups. This complicated process of tradition—from Jesus through the early communities to the Gospels—over a fairly long period of time has been widely accepted by Christians today.

Recognition of the complex nature of our chief sources about Jesus has been one of the factors that led historians and theologians over the past two hundred years on the so-called quest for the historical Jesus.[27] The idea behind this quest is to go beneath the surface of the Gospels, to peel away the accretions made in the process of transmission, and so to arrive at Jesus of Nazareth—as he really was.

The quest for the historical Jesus seems to some a circular and speculative task. Some of us despair of its success and prefer to assume a continuity between Jesus, the early church, and the Gospels. Many NT specialists, however, are not satisfied with the assumption in favor of such organic continuity. In an effort to get back to the teaching of the historical Jesus, these scholars have devised several "authenticating" criteria: (1) A Gospel saying must reflect the conditions of Palestine in Jesus' time and/or be capable of translation back into Aramaic or Hebrew. (2) It should be found in several independent early Christian strands of tradition. (3) It must be coherent or consistent with what is known about Jesus. (4) And most deci-

[26] For a survey of scholarship, see L. H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937-1980)* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1984) 679-703; J. N. Birdsall, "The Continuing Enigma of Josephus' Testimony about Jesus," *BJRL* 67 (1985) 609-22.

[27] See A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1961); G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960); J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

sively, it must be so unique that it cannot be ascribed to Judaism or to the early church.[28]

There are many problems with the logic of these criteria and their application. I wish to focus only on the fourth criterion, the so-called criterion of dissimilarity or discontinuity: A saying that is so unique that it cannot be ascribed to Judaism or to the early church may be ascribed to Jesus. The problem with this criterion is that it makes Jesus dissimilar to or discontinuous with Judaism (and the early church). It wrenches Jesus out of his Jewish context and turns him into a kind of creative genius or eccentric (depending on one's perspective), transcending his culture. It fails to acknowledge the Jewishness of Jesus, or at least dismisses it as uninteresting and unimportant.

The quest for the historical Jesus has also attracted Jewish scholars. And here we usually encounter the opposite problem. Those Jews who do not dismiss Jesus as an apostate but approach him sympathetically as a brother often do so on the assumption that Jesus the Jew remained entirely within the boundaries of Judaism. They employ a criterion of similarity or continuity and assign whatever does not fit into their idea of Judaism in Jesus' time to the early church or to the evangelists. They will argue that Jesus' teaching has been misunderstood or mistranslated, that it was only part of an inner-Jewish conflict, and that it has been distorted by the early church's mission to the Gentiles. The picture of Jesus that emerges from such arguments is that of a basically loyal and observant Jew, with perhaps a few odd ideas. Whatever differs from Judaism is dismissed as uninteresting or unimportant or simply mistaken.[29]

Thus, in placing Jesus the Jew in his context we have a problem of sources. What Jewish sources we have are either late or suspect. The Christian sources have passed through a complicated process of tradition. Those who attempt to get behind the Gospels and thus discover the "real" Jesus involve themselves in a speculative and often circular enterprise. Modern Christian proponents of the quest for the historical Jesus take Jesus out of his Jewish context and focus mainly on his "un-Jewish" teachings. Modern Jewish proponents of the quest leave Jesus in the confines of Judaism as they understand them and thus echo the famous statement made by Claude G. Montefiore: "His teaching, where good, was not original, and where original

[28] Good examples of the application of these criteria are found in N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York/Evanston, IL: Harper & Row, 1967).

[29] See T. Weiss-Rosmarin (ed.), *Jewish Expressions on Jesus: An Anthology* (New York: Ktav, 1977); and P. Lapide, *Israelis, Jews and Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1979). For comprehensive bibliographic coverage and a critique from a Christian evangelical perspective, see Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus.*

was not Jewish or good."[30] Some go further than Montefiore and attribute the so-called "original" teachings to the early church rather than to Jesus. Others assign these "original" teachings to Jesus' eccentricity with respect to his Jewish heritage.

Theological Assessments of Jesus

Our varying assessments about the theological significance of Jesus constitute the third methodological problem. That Christians and Jews differ with respect to the significance of Jesus is clear. For Jews, Jesus is another Jewish teacher and another victim of oppression. For Christians, Jesus is that and more. He is the authoritative interpreter of the Law, whose death brought about the possibility of right relationship with God.

Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Much of his teaching according to the Gospels stands well within the boundaries of the Torah and the wisdom tradition. Nevertheless, the Gospels present Jesus as the climactic revelation of God, surpassing and fulfilling the revelations accorded previously to the people of God. In this theological perspective, Jesus emerges as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah.[31] Not only can he say what it means (as Hillel and Shammai did), but he can even abrogate it or bypass it.

The six antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-48) illustrate this point. In some cases, Jesus extends a biblical precept in order to get at the root disposition. Thus Jesus forbids anger and lust in order to avoid murder and adultery. But his antithesis on divorce seems to repeal or reject the permission and procedure found in Deut 24:1. His statement regarding oaths goes beyond the biblical prohibition against swearing falsely in Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 23:21. His teaching on nonretaliation pushes the biblical law of retaliation (see Exod 21:23-24; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21) to the point of abrogation.

Those who situate Jesus entirely within the confines of first-century Judaism must attribute such an attitude toward the Torah to the early church or the evangelists. The evangelists themselves, however, present these and similar teachings as flowing from Jesus' authority as the one sent from God and having authority over the Torah and its interpretation. The issue for them was not how Jesus stood with respect to the Torah but how the Torah stood with respect to Jesus. Here those who use the criterion of dissimilarity appear to have the upper hand.

[30] C. G. Montefiore, "Jewish Conceptions of Christianity," *HibJ* 28 (1929-30) 249.

[31] R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (London/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University, 1975).

Jesus was a victim of oppression. The trial and death of Jesus have been lively topics of discussion over the past thirty years.[32] What has emerged from this discussion has been almost a consensus on the following matters: The final legal responsibility for Jesus' death lay with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus was executed as a perceived political threat ("the King of the Jews") according to a Roman mode of punishment. The evangelists deliberately played down Roman responsibility and played up Jewish involvement. The precise degree of Jewish involvement in the events leading up to Jesus' death is still disputed. Were the chief priests and elders the initiators of the procedure, merely active collaborators, passive spectators, or unwilling agents? At any rate, it is now recognized that, when the Passion Narratives begin, the Pharisees almost entirely drop out of sight.

Jesus was another Jewish victim of oppression. Like John the Baptist, Jesus the son of Ananias, Theudas, the Egyptian prophet, and other prophetic figures of his day, Jesus was perceived as a threat to the political stability of Judea.[33] In the light of Hitler's Holocaust, there has developed among Jews and Christians an attractive approach to Jesus of Nazareth as a symbol of Jewish victimization throughout the ages. Not only does such an approach bring Jesus back into his Jewish context, but it also brings into that same context the many Christians in our world today who suffer with Jesus and for his name. It is a beautiful thought and deserves even more reflection by Christians and Jews together.

Again, however, the Gospels and other NT writings go beyond this common Christian-Jewish theology of martyrdom. They portray Jesus as Savior of the world. They see his death as carried out according to God's will and a divine plan. They use such terms as redemption, reconciliation, justification, and atonement to express what has happened as a result of Jesus' death.

I do not raise these differences regarding the Torah and the significance of Jesus' death to argue for the superiority of the Christian view. I do so only to help us recognize the theological differences between Christians and Jews.

[32] Some influential studies include J. Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1959); S. F. G. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Stein & Day, 1968); the various articles in R. Gordis (ed.), *The Trial of Jesus in the Light of History,* a special issue of *Judaism* 20 (1971) 6-74; E. Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984); G. S. Sloyan, *Jesus on Trial* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); W. R. Wilson, *The Execution of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1970); and P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (SJ 1; 2d ed., rev. by T. A. Burkill and G. Vermes; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1974).

[33] A full treatment appears in J. S. Hanson and R. A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs. Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985). See also F. Watson, "Why Was Jesus Crucified?," *Theology* 88 (1985) 105-12: Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements."

Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Jesus was a victim. From these two facts, Christians and Jews have drawn different conclusions and can stay together regarding Jesus' identity only part of the way. At some point along that way we necessarily confront the theological issues raised so eloquently from the Jewish perspective by Samuel Sandmel: "We [Jews] have not believed that Jesus was the Messiah; we have not been willing to call him Lord; we have not believed that the *Logos* became incarnate as Jesus; we have not believed that Jesus was, or is, the very Godness of God . . . we believe that man must make his own atonement, not have atonement wrought for him."[34]

Conclusion

Jews and Christians should welcome the recent attention given to the Jewishness of Jesus as a help to mutual understanding and religious cooperation. But it is important for us to come to grips with some problems involved in talking about the Jewishness of Jesus. (1) Our increased understanding of the diversity within Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' time makes it difficult to know precisely what kind of Jew Jesus was and against which background we should try to interpret him. (2) Jewish sources about Jesus are either late or suspect; Christian sources have passed through a complicated process of tradition. Those who try to get behind the sources either take Jesus out of Judaism or interpret him entirely within Judaism. (3) Both Jews and Christians view Jesus as a teacher and a victim of oppression. However, their ultimate theological assessments of Jesus differ. The recognition of our theological differences about Jesus demands that we continue to work together on the pertinent historical, methodological, and theological issues.

[34] *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University, 1965) 44, 46-47.