

REVIEW

Zev Garber, ed.

The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation

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The Jewish Jesus is a collection of essays, about half of which are by scholars who presented papers at a symposium entitled "Jesus in the Context of Judaism and the Challenge to the Church," held at the Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic studies at Case Western Reserve University in May 2009. This group of essays appeared first in the journal *Shofar* (Spring, 2010), were re-edited, and then were joined with a similar number of new essays and compiled in this volume. The original group of symposium papers was centered on plenary addresses by Zev Garber (whose contribution appears in this volume as "The Jewish Jesus: A Partisan's Imagination"), Eugene Fisher ("Typical Jewish Misunderstandings of Christ, Christianity, and Jewish-Christian Relations over the Centuries"), and Richard Rubenstein ("What Was at Stake in the Parting of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity?"). Other conference presentations in the volume include papers by Ziony Zevit ("Jesus Stories, Jewish Liturgy, and Some Evolving Theologies until circa 200 CE: Stimuli and Reactions"), James F. Moore ("The Amazing Mr. Jesus"), Herbert Basser ("*Avon Gilyon* [*Document of Sin*, b. Shabb. 116a] or *Euvanggeleon* [*Good News*]"), Steven Bowman ("Jewish Responses to Byzantine Polemics from the Ninth through the Eleventh Centuries"), Henry Knight ("Before Whom Do We Stand?"), and Steve Jacobs ("Can We Talk? The Jewish Jesus in a Dialogue Between Jews and Christians"). Some of these contributions differ from the papers the authors presented at the symposium.

Because this is a one-volume collection of conference papers and invited papers there is a certain amount of disharmony, both in content and in tone. Only symposium presenters had the benefit of responses, formal and informal, from others who were there, as well as responses from the editor of this volume. Nonetheless, Garber has edited a volume whose contribution to the field will endure long beyond the memory of the symposium he organized.

One helpful aspect of this volume is that it provides a snapshot of contemporary scholarship on the question of the Jewish Jesus. The contributors cover a wide range of fields related to research about Jesus. They include professors or retired professors of Judaic or Jewish Studies (Garber, Basser, Bowman, Jacobs, Shaul Magid, and Rivka Ulmer), Religion (Bruce Chilton, Rubenstein, and Emily Leah Silverman), Intertestamental and Early Christian Literatures (Michael Cook, who teaches in a rabbinical seminary), History (Yitzchak Kerem), Holocaust Studies (Knight), Classics (Sara Mandell), Theology (Moore), Archaeology (Joshua Schwartz), English (Norman Simms), Jewish-Christian Studies (Christina Smerick), and biblical studies (Zevit). The former lay Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Fisher) has contributed an essay as well. Only a handful of these scholars have focused the majority of their academic attention in the past on the New Testament or on Second-Temple Judaism specifically, and so the volume offers fresh, if polyphonous, perspectives on the Jewishness of Jesus. It is worth noting that

some notable scholars are absent from this volume, such as Amy-Jill Levine, Peter Schäfer, Daniel Boyarin, Paula Frederiksen, and Shaye Cohen.

Garber's introduction sets the tone for the volume (as it presumably set the tone for the conference), but it also sets the volume within its historical and theological contexts. Garber considers John Paul II to have added the flourish to an era of improved Catholic-Jewish relations that began with *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. He credits this Pope with doing more than anyone else to rid the Roman Catholic Church of antisemitism. Further he credits him with formulating a positive appreciation of Judaism as Christianity's "elder brother" (p. 6). The editor dedicates this volume to its contributors, but clearly John Paul II was a source of inspiration as well.

It would be foolish to attempt to summarize, much less comment upon, nineteen scholarly essays on the topic of the Jewish Jesus in order to identify common themes, lacunae, and blind spots. All treat the topic but the essays are very diverse. I will thus focus on one group of essays that focus on the New Testament and the Jewish Jesus. There are other subtopics, such as Jewish-Christian dialogue, that are well represented (in essays by Smerick, Mandell, Knight, Silverman, Jacobs, and Magid), but space precludes a fuller discussion.

In addition to his introduction, Garber also offers the first essay in the volume, entitled "The Jewish Jesus: A Partisan's Imagination." Garber is strongly in the S. G. F. Brandon/Hyam Maccoby camp (recently popularized by Rabbi Shmuley Boteach). They see Jesus as a sympathizer with the Zealots and believe Mark attempted to cover up Jesus' political involvement. Garber's essay is as succinct an exposition of this position as I have seen, but contributes nothing especially new to it. Garber concludes his essay by endorsing a view of Jesus strongly contrary to the view of "pre-Vatican II Catholic traditionalis[ts]" (p. 16). This view was recently apparent in Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," which Garber speculates reflects the filmmaker's antagonism toward the reforms of Vatican II more than a genuine concern for a historically reliable presentation.

Ziony Zevit engages in a somewhat speculative foray into comparative narratology, theology, and Jewish liturgy in a study of Christian and rabbinic texts from the first few centuries CE, though his argument is too unfocused. Zevit argues that the issue that alienated the nascent Jesus movement from other Jews was not so much the claim that Jesus was Messiah but that he was God. This is not a surprising conclusion, and Prof. Zevit's route to it is difficult to follow.

Zevit's argument begins with some assumptions about Paul. Prior to his conversion, Paul must have had knowledge of stories about Jesus that he found disturbing. Then, his visionary experience "transformed the significance of what he had once held to be true and important" and led Paul to no longer reject claims about Jesus as false (p. 66). During his sojourn in Damascus following this experience, Paul would have heard more stories about Jesus. These stories formed the core of Paul's apostolic preaching to his new churches.

The problem with this argument, which is only the first stage in Zevit's extended discussion of narratological conflict in the generations following Jesus' crucifixion, is that it is almost entirely speculative. The evidence in Paul's letters does not support Zevit's claims. Paul insists that the only message he preached about Jesus to his Corinthian audience was "Jesus the Messiah, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). That is certainly a Jesus story, but it is only one story, and Paul's letters are famously bereft of much more about Jesus. Paul's report of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-26) is the fullest account of Jesus' life, and it has a very specific purpose in his letter, as he says it did in his missionary preaching. There can be no doubt that Paul narrated Jesus'

crucifixion and his resurrection, but there is little evidence that he was a transmitter of other stories about Jesus.

If Paul is taken out of the picture, Zevit's reconstruction of the conflict of stories that explained the separation between post-70 Judaism and nascent Christianity is compelling. Particularly interesting to consider is the baraita about Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who was once "captivated" by a word of "minut" (some type of heresy) in the name of Jesus son of Pantera in Sepphoris some years before he was himself charged with "minut" (Tosefta Hullin 2:24). That an orthodox sage could feel tempted by heretical words and then ashamed suggests that the growing rift between Jews and Christians was at least in part a rift between stories.

The second half of Zevit's article uses a Jewish liturgical text to argue that the Christian claim that Jesus was God was early. He argues that the predications about God in the Shmoneh Esreh ("the Eighteen Blessings") may be compared to the predications made about Jesus in the Gospels (pp. 74-76). The parallels between predicates of God and of Jesus are not very convincing. Anyone wishing to employ this type of argument needs to be more rigorous.

Ziony Zevit is among the world's most prominent scholars in Near Eastern Studies, not in the study of the New Testament nor any other field connected directly to Jesus research. Herbert Basser, on the other hand, has emerged as the dean of scholars interested in exploring the connections between the thought-worlds of the Gospels and of the rabbinic corpus. Basser's own thought-world can occasionally be difficult to penetrate, but those who have persevered have been more-than-amply rewarded. In his contribution to this volume Basser goes beyond his current work on the connections between the Gospel of Matthew and the Rabbis, taking up the question of the Jewish self-identity of Jesus. Basser addresses this topic with a series of questions (in a style familiar to those who know his work): "Was Jesus a good Jewish boy with some constructive critiques of the status quo?" More specifically, and less importantly, he asks, "Was he executed by Rome for his anti-Rome sentiments?" and "Was he a rebel trying to destroy the foundations of old Jewish life so he would begin a new sect of righteousness?" (p. 93). Basser's Jesus is very Jewish, not estranged from Judaism or seeking to create a new religion.

Basser turns to Matthew 10:24-25 as the text on which he bases his main argument in the essay, that Jesus was not antagonistic to Judaism but those after him, in the early Christian movement, were. Basser previously treated this passage with reference to rabbinic discussions of the relationship between teacher and student (in his *The Mind Behind the Gospels*). In the present essay, he extends the analysis by bringing in one of his own spiritual progenitors, the Baal Shem Tov, the description of whose ministry (to use a term rarely applied to him) is replete with accounts of both religious reform and of miracles. Basser's comparison is both bold and intellectually rigorous, and draws on the important insights of Harry A. Wolfson in his 1962 essay "How the Jews will reclaim Jesus" (p. 95).

Perhaps the most suggestive aspect of Basser's essay is its title, "*Avon Gilyon (Document of Sin, b. Shabb. 116a) or Euvanggeleon (Good News)*." The title alludes to attempts by Talmudic Rabbis Meir and Yohanan to outdo each other in their mockery of the Gospel text, one punning on *euvanggeleon* with *aven gilyon* ("document of falsehood"), spelled with the Hebrew letter 'ayin, and the other with *avon gilyon*, spelled with an aleph ("document of sin"). Neither of these are very good news. This verbal contest occurs in the Babylonian Talmud immediately before the much-discussed story of Imma Shalom and the question of whether daughters can inherit (bShabb. 116b). This is the story Basser examines in this essay, taking it as an account of a historical encounter over a distinction between Jewish and Christian inheritance law. If it is historical it certainly speaks to the dismissiveness of the Sages toward Christianity and at least the views

of some early Christians. The text, as Basser points out, has been much discussed at least since Travers Herford, with recent contributions by Burton Visotzky and Peter Schäfer, but in greatest detail by Tal Ilan (in *Mine and Yours are Hers* from 1997). Ilan comes to a different conclusion from Basser's, namely that the Babylonian Talmud "re-costumes" (her phrase) a standard account of a corrupt judge to indict Christian ethics generally. Basser's point does not entirely depend on the trope originating as a first-century anti-Christian polemic, however, and he must be correct in locating the particular version of it as illustrating an encounter between Jews and Christians, probably in the time of the Talmud itself.

There is no way to encompass the riches of this volume in a brief review. The appearance of these essays, with whom many will find constructive engagement, is a welcome gift to a field of scholarship replete with recent gifts. Add it to your "Jesus and Judaism" library.