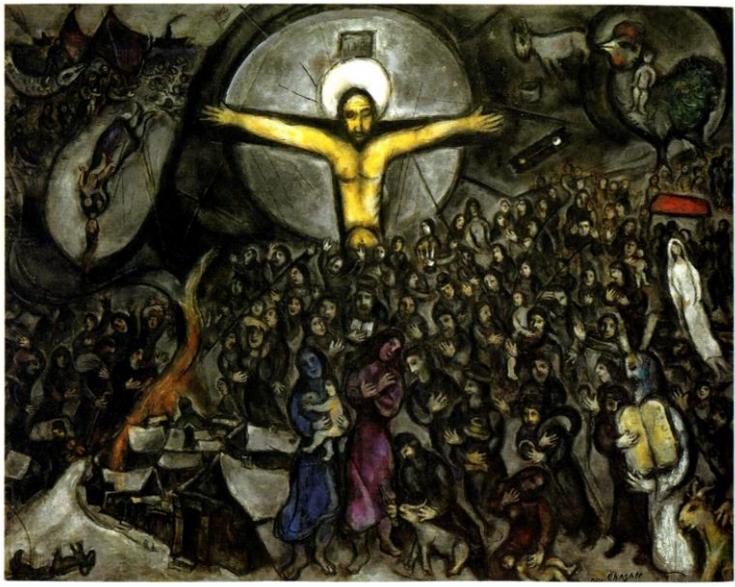


CCJR ANNUAL MEETING PROCEEDING

What Difference Does a Life Make?
Reflections on Jesus the Jew

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Marc Chagall, *Exodus*. 1952.

A few years ago, I believe it was during the last Presidential election, some American bishops were calling for stricter enforcement of communion. Only Catholics in proper standing should receive the sacrament. A dear friend—an elderly Jesuit, ever concerned with social justice issues—was discussing all this with me. Well, the devil entered into me. I turned to him and stated that I had a problem.

“What is that?” he responded.

“I have a problem with Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

“Yes. You see, Jesus was never baptized, and died a Jew. And from what the authorities say, it would seem that if he entered a church today he could not receive himself!”

The Jesuit, earnestly considering the question, stood there stunned. In fact, he had no answer and soon found he had to get to an appointment.

Despite the playfulness of this incident, there is a serious issue at stake. Yeshua bar Mariamne, Jesus, son of Mariam, Jesus, the Nazorene, Jesus, the Jew, still lurks in the social memory of the West and disturbs the subconscious recesses of Christians and Jews. It is as if there have been numerous attempts to remove the traces of his circumcision, despite the fact that the holy foreskin was located in numerous churches through the Middle Ages. Indeed, since the second century, and particularly from the fourth, there have been significant efforts to cover the matter up through theological sleights of hand.

I should add here that forgetfulness in the ancient world does not come about through simple erasure but through replacement. A Roman temple or a Jewish synagogue, for example, does not simply deteriorate but is reconfigured, replaced, or built over by a church. We need to ask why and how was the Jewish Jesus replaced?

Yet, at the same time, there is that disturbing fact—The Jewish Jesus—continued to survive. As Freud and others have pointed out a great deal of antisemitism comes from Christians’ unwillingness to recognize the Jew within their deepest dreams.

It has been, however, my experience over my years of teaching that for many Jesus is so removed from history that he cannot be imagined as Jewish. Occasionally I ask my students whether the fact that Jesus was a Jew makes a difference to them. Some exhibit the tolerant idealism of contemporary youth. They see

no reason even to wonder about this, just as they would have no problem with the possibility of Jesus having been married or gay. But others are stunned by the question. As one young woman in a recent honors class frankly declared, she had never imagined such a possibility. She had gone to Catholic schools all her life and now was at Xavier. Somehow an incredible miracle has occurred in the process of transmitting the story of Jesus: the very traces of Jesus' Jewishness had been completely removed.

How is this possible? Let me illustrate it this way.

Often, when introducing the question of the historical Jesus, I juxtapose two images. First comes the 2001 forensic reconstruction undertaken by the BBC of a skull dated to first-century Israel. Then I present the mosaic of an imperial Jesus found in the Bishop's palace in Ravenna from the fifth century. Of course, the reconstructed face, swarthy, low browed, and distinctly non-Aryan, is not an image of the historical Jesus. But neither is the beardless Roman, clad in royal purple and military breastplate, offering in one hand an open codex and with the other bearing a cross-turned-pike over his shoulder. Indeed, tellingly this dominant figure's right foot is stepping down on the neck of the Lion of Judah.

Both of these images convey much of the sweep of history. They speak first of all to what we do and do not know. We have no clue as to Jesus' appearance; no coins or statues honored crucified peasants. The first-century Palestinian skull, in fact, was reconstructed using the physiological characteristics typical of the region. Now when it comes to Jesus' words and deeds we have only the fragments that have survived the push and shove of history. But from these literary remnants, however, NT Scholarship has been able to learn a great deal. We can detect a creative sage who tempted his listeners with a kaleidoscopic vision of the Empire of God. We can see indications that he was a healer who dared to break the boundaries of table fellowship. We can also register the sober

note that his death was a public execution, designed to erase him from memory.

Of course, the Roman authorities failed in their purpose: the followers of Jesus did not forget him. Recent scholarship has attempted for some time to realize and plumb the diverse and complex responses of his followers to his fate. Rudolf Bultmann succinctly summed this up by saying that the “Preacher became the preached.” *But this paradoxical quip does not fully explain how a Jewish peasant ended up in Roman imperial armor.*

Briefly in touching on the Jewishness of Jesus we can say:

I. The work of NT scholarship suggests that Jesus was a Jewish sage, a distinct Jewish voice, among a number of competing Jewish voices. Let us hear a few of his words:

Matthew 5: "As you know, we once were told, 'You are to love your neighbor' and 'You are to hate your enemy.' {44}But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. {45}You'll then become children of your Father in the heavens. <God> causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust. {46}Tell me, if you love those who love you, why should you be commended for that? Even the toll collectors do as much, don't they? {47}And if you greet only your friends, what have you done that is exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, don't they? {48}To sum up, you are to be unstinting in your generosity in the way your heavenly Father's generosity is unstinting."

Matthew 5: Don't react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. {40}If someone is determined to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it. {41}Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go along an extra mile.

Luke 12: {22}He said to his disciples, "That's why I tell you: Don't fret about life--what you're going to eat--or about your

body--what you're going to wear. {23}Remember, there is more to living than food and clothing. {24}Think about the crows: they don't plant or harvest, they don't have storerooms or barns. Yet God feeds them. You're worth a lot more than the birds! {25}Can any of you add an hour to life by fretting about it? {26}So if you can't do a little thing like that, why worry about the rest? {27}Think about how the lilies grow: they don't slave and they never spin. Yet let me tell you, even Solomon at the height of his glory was never decked out like one of them. {28}If God dresses up the grass in the field, which is here today and tomorrow is tossed into an oven, it is surely more likely <that God cares for> you, you who don't take anything for granted! {29}And don't be constantly on the lookout for what you're going to eat and what you're going to drink. Don't give it a thought. {30}These are all things the world's pagans seek, and your Father is aware that you need them. {31}Instead, you are to seek <God's> domain, and these things will come to you as a bonus.

Mark 7:15 It's not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it's what comes out of the person that defiles.

Luke 6:20 Then he would look squarely at his disciples and say: Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you.

Luke 10:30 Jesus replied: There was a man going from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead.

{31}Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road; when he caught sight of him, he went out of his way to avoid him. {32}In the same way, when a Levite came to the place, he took one look at him and crossed the road to avoid him.

{33}But this Samaritan who was traveling that way came to where he was and was moved to pity at the sight of

him. {34}He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive oil and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. {35}The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, 'Look after him, and on my way back I'll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had.'

Luke 17:20 "You won't be able to observe the coming of God's imperial rule. {21}People are not going to be able to say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'Over there!' On the contrary, God's imperial rule is right there in your presence."

Here is offered a vision to listeners of a world that works as if God were in charge. In contrast to some scribal visions it is not an apocalyptic world where rewards and punishments will be meted out. Instead we have a kaleidoscopic vision that upends the usual way of power relationships. In fact, the more one considers the words of Jesus, the more one is led to the conclusion that he is one of the earliest of a long list of Jewish stand-up comics. Jesus envisioned an atmosphere where one could fall into the hands of the enemy and come out the better for it. His is a curious God who delivers benefits without distinction or discrimination. It is a God in whom the nobodies of the land can trust.

This echoes the breakthrough of Amos, who joined the memory of the Exodus to his social world. Amos spoke of a God who could remember slaves and now calls the people to remember orphans and widows.

II. Recent NT Scholarship also has underscored that his death was a Roman execution. Moreover, we can note that the very meaning of his death was constructed in Jewish terms. Again let me briefly summarize such findings.

1. It is clear that not all of Jesus' followers were concerned with determining a meaning for his death. The Sayings Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas and the Didache are evidence that the death of Jesus was not their focal point of

interest. Indeed, when Q alludes to Jesus' death it does so as the death of a Jewish prophet.

2. From the pre-Pauline materials we can detect that the Syrian Jewish community of Jesus followers began to make sense of the death of Jesus as that of a martyr's death such as found in the book of 4th Maccabees. Just as the other Jewish martyrs Jesus dies for the people.
3. Recent Pauline investigations would point out that Paul discovered that the God of Israel not only accepts what appeared to Paul as a godless, abandoned criminal but also reaches out to the Nations on equal terms of trust.
4. By reading the Gospel of Mark within the late first century context scholars have argued that the writer of the Gospel of Mark constructed the death story of Jesus in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple and the Roman victory over the rebellious Jews. He characterized Jesus in the terms of the well-known story of the suffering and vindication of an innocent one.

We can summarize this story thus: **The actions and claims of an innocent person provoke his opponents to conspire against him. This leads to an accusation, trial, condemnation, and ordeal. In some instances this results in his shameful death. The hero of the story reacts characteristically, expressing his innocence, frustration, or trust in prayer, while there are also various reactions to his fate by characters in the tale. Either at the brink of death or in death itself the innocent one is rescued and vindicated. This vindication entails the exaltation and acclamation of the hero as well as the reaction and punishment of his opponents.**

Most important: the death of Jesus for Mark's community was not envisioned as an exclusive event but as a death in solidarity with all those innocent sufferers.

But if all of these scholarly advances have merit then why has it taken so long for them to be recognized? Indeed, if this assessment indicates the historical record, what happened that so much was forgotten? Moreover, how did a maverick group of Jewish peasants end up as heresy vigilantes?

First of all, we must realize that Judaism before the destruction of the Temple could be found in a variety of forms. The Pharisees' take on the Tradition was not the only interpretation in town. In short, there were many ways of being a son or daughter of Abraham. But it must also be noted that first century groups or parties were rather competitive and did not see other groups within a lens of fairness. Each group would presume that they had hold of what counted for the real. But this competitive habit was compounded by a further assumption. Competition does stress differences. *But what if the claim of difference exceeds the usual limits? How does one account for someone having a lasting impact?*

To stir the pot a bit more, let me read a most interesting aside by an ancient historian:

"It seems to me that a man who is different from all other humans could not have come into being apart from divinity."
(Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.30.2)

This was not a Christian theologian, although it is a theological reflection. This is an appraisal by the writer Arrian about the value and importance of Alexander the Great.

To account for difference the ancient imagination reached for a divine explanation. Only the divine realm could deliver the surplus power or energy for such spectacular individuals. Sometimes they were called "divine men," sometimes "sons of God." Such entitlements came from those who approved of the benefits that flowed through such extraordinary individuals.

If one couples this language with the competitive world of the Greco-Roman age, then one can understand *that a note of "difference" is based upon the perception of having or gaining an advantage.* To call someone a "son of God" meant that one was in some way "different" from others. The Roman coinage proclaimed the emperor as *uios Theou* (son of God).

It is crucial that we notice how "being different" was justified and explained. Within the aside of Arrian stands what I would call an "exclusive principle." Difference is predicated upon prerogative; a domination pattern underlines such thinking. For difference is defined through domination. *One becomes unique and different at the expense of others.*

I should add that is not the full range of either the modern or ancient word *diaphero* ("to differ"). The ancient Greek word has a vast range of meaning. The basic root metaphor is that of "coming or carrying across or through." But the word spreads out in meaning; in various contexts it can mean "endure to the end," "spread," "tear asunder," "plunder," "excel," "quarrel," "struggle," "dispute," "make a difference."

Allow me to put it this way.

What difference does a life make—a human life? As we hurtle through interstellar space, we are becoming increasingly aware that what we thought to be eternal verities are in fact aging satellites that cascade and crash.

What difference does a life make—a human life?

It is a question that each of us has to answer. Does a human life make a difference? Does my life make a difference? Does yours? In a related sense, we can also ask: does the life of another make a difference in our lives? This question is most radical, for it gets to the heart of our existence on this planet. To ask if a human life makes a difference entails the quest for significance of our existence. If we did not think we could make a difference, if we did not think we counted, could we

continue to act, even to live? Even Albert Camus declared that our ability to care and love in the face of the absurd represented the human face of freedom against the nothingness of the universe.

I would contend that Jesus the Jewish sage still has something to say to us even today.

But to ask what difference does a life make is distinct from considering a life as “different.” In the latter case another judgment is reached as the element of comparison is brought in. Here we begin to detect that such and such a life is different from another. Calculation and the detection of advantage enter the picture. Moreover, even if we ourselves are making this judgment we are taking over certain social assumptions upon which to make the comparison. Sometimes, especially if we agree or are indifferent, we simply let others declare what that difference is and means.

It is with this attempt to compete through determining and maintaining difference at the expense of others that we return to the domination patterns known so well through the centuries.

It is fitting then at this point to consider two great theologians of the twentieth century to help deepen this conversation through time: Marc Chagall and Eli Wiesel.

I would submit that we need each other to remind one another not only of our humanity but of the presence of mystery in our midst. This means that we need all the imagination and honesty possible and that we take seriously artists' visions and writers' insights -- such as Wiesel's *Night* and Chagall's *Exodus*.

Here we can begin to see, for example, the courage and the continued conversation of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. In that staggering scene where the concentration camp is forced to watch the hanging of a child, the narrator remembers hearing a man

asking: "Where is God now?" And the narrator adds: "I heard a voice within me answer him: ...Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows." He then notes that he cannot pray as the inmates later celebrate Rosh Hashanah. In his haunting style Wiesel writes:

How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces?...But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused.

This scene is part of an extended conversation that began so long ago. The Tale of the Suffering Innocent One has been taken up again, as it was by Andre Schwartz Bart in *The Last of the Just*. The writer of the passion of Mark was an earlier interlocutor of this centuries long conversation, or perhaps better, lament. The echoes of these stories tremble across time and space. They reinforce and cross-examine each other. Both the agony of the suffering of the innocent and the question of the justice of God are again and again placed before us.

The same can be said of the painter Marc Chagall. While many are taken by the brilliance and courage of *White Crucifixion*, I would mention Chagall's *Exodus*. In the manner of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, one can describe this painting as "Here comes Everybody!" Chagall gives us a rush of Jews in exodus, with Moses, holding the sacred tablets on the right side of the picture, fleeing mothers cradling children at the center, a synagogue in flames to the left, the ever-present signature rooster aloft, and a crucified Jesus in the back, embedded with the people, with his arms extended on the cross that seem to encompass all in this frantic movement.

Here Chagall undermines the centuries of domination, the ever-present search for the competitive edge, the exclusionary

sense of difference, by placing all this frantic movement within the overarching perspective of enfolding the innocent.

Our contemporary discussions need more of this in order to seek and hear the variety of voices in order to detect the presence of mystery in our midst.

So, then, what difference does it all make to remember that Jesus was a Jew?

Memory—we can realize that our social memories are complicated and subject to historical displacement. The critical re-imagination of the historical Jesus as a first century Jew is not only necessary for our intellectual search but even more so for the ethical consequences for our lives today. How can we, for instance, countenance signs that equally condemn homosexuals and the killers of Jesus, when we realize that Jesus' vision would counsel very differently and his death was originally seen in solidarity with other innocent ones?

- A. It is a challenge to both Jews and Christians. For we must all reappraise what Jesus meant and means, his vision and his fate. Can his vision and ethical challenges be part of ongoing Jewish debate?
- B. For Christians this means that the imperial invasion and evasion, where difference is defined by seeking advantage, by a competitive calculus, by a demonstration of power and dominion **at the expense of others, is a denial of the vision of Jesus and the earliest concerns of his followers.** Indeed, such an imperial modus operandi led not only to Jesus' death but to the deaths of millions of his kin.
- C. There is also the ever-widening challenge to all who live on this planet. This discussion cannot be limited to a Jewish-Christian *tete-a-tete*. The reality is that Jesus has leaked out. He is no longer the sole property of the churches, nor of the synagogues. Indeed, he, along with Moses, Mohammad, Buddha, and other religious figures, has

become available to all. This does not mean that we can bleach Jesus of his particularity. Rather it means that even greater critical focus must be made along with a reappraisal of the consequences of bringing this difficult Jew into the new global arena.