

Jesus the Jew: Nature and Nurture, Ethnicity, and Performance

Part of a special volume on the [“Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ” Research Project](#)

AMY-JILL LEVINE

amy-jill.levine@vanderbilt.edu

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235

Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, Hartford, CT 06105

This project asks, “What is the religious meaning of the Jewish identity of Jesus for Christians and for Jews today and for their contemporary interrelationship?” Whether we understand “religious” in terms of theology, halakhah, communal standing, authority, or otherwise, Jesus has no “religious” meaning for Jews save for those who identify as messianic. Jesus offers no more and no less import for today’s Judaism (belief or practice) than does the Jewish identity of Philo, Spinoza, Marx (both Karl and Groucho), or the recently retired basketball player Sue Bird. Jesus’s ethical teaching has no more authority for Jews than do the teachings of Confucius or the Buddha or the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹ While some Christians may insist Jesus is Lord of all and therefore is soteriologically necessary and effective for Jews and everyone else, Jews need not accept this claim. Jews and Christians thus need not agree on the role of Jesus for Jews, a matter that will be only sorted out when the Messiah comes or comes back.

The one place where the “religious” meaning of Jesus for Jews may be found is in his connection to the turning of gentiles from whatever their worship focus to the God of Israel.² The problem here, at least for me, is that I do not want to promote the disparaging of alternative forms of worship, whether Hindu, Shinto, Jain, etc. Here is a place where I wrestle with the tradition.

However, the inclusion of “religious” meaning in the project’s focus should not preclude Jews from discussing the import of Jesus’s Jewish identity for Jews

¹ To define Jews as “people who do not worship Jesus” (a definition I have heard more than once from my Christian students) is to impose a Christian definition onto a non-Christian group, to fail to distinguish Jews from all other non-Christian groups, and to define Jews negatively (what we are not) rather than positively (who we are).

² See the essay by Jehoschua Ahrens in this collection; Ahrens, “Christology,” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).

today as well as for Jewish-Christian relations. For me, a Jewish student of Christian origins and a member of a Modern Orthodox synagogue, Jesus's Jewish identity is of import both for personal and for historical reasons. Personally, Jesus is part of my Jewish tradition; I do not have to worship him as Lord and Savior to find his Jewish teachings, from Torah interpretation to parables to forms of debate, intelligent and often compelling. Thus, I find that studying his words in their historical context makes me a better Jew. They inform me of the diverse robustness of Jewish teaching, they offer plausible interpretations of Torah, and they show various options in terms of practice and belief available to my ancestors. I am also aware of how removing Jesus from his Jewish context and then painting that context in negative terms, a practice that can be found throughout Christian history, inevitably leads not only to bad theology but also to antisemitism.

In speaking of the "Jewish" Jesus, I am taking a definition that begins with ethnicity. The child of Jewish parents is a Jew;³ converts to Judaism gain a new genealogical identity: they receive a Hebrew name and then the identification "daughter of our mother Sarah" (*bat Sarah imenu*) or "son of our father Abraham" (*ben Avraham avinu*).

Rituals then confirm this Jewish identity, beginning with the ritual circumcision (*brit mila*) of eight-day-old sons⁴ or the increasingly widespread naming or welcoming ceremonies for daughters.⁵ So does nurture, how the child is raised in familial and communal settings or how the Jew-by-choice⁶ is recognized as a community member. Praxis, which serves to confirm Jewish identity, concerns acts such as participation in Sabbath observance, feast and fast days, synagogue membership or affiliation with Jewish-identified groups such as Hadassah or local Jewish Federations, and study of Jewish texts within communal settings.

Jewish identity, especially ethnic identity, is also determined by distinction both *from* non-Jews (e.g., recognizing oneself to be a Jew in contrast to being a gentile or Samaritan) and *by* non-Jews (e.g., recognition, out of philo- or antisemitism, by gentiles or Samaritans of an individual's Jewish identity). Thus, regardless of belief or practice, in sociological understanding, the Jew is a Jew. Regardless of self-identity or perception, the Jew will be, in many cases, identified as a Jew by non-Jews.

³ Since Tannaitic times the child of a Jewish mother. The American Reform movement also identifies as a Jew a child of paternal Jewish descent who is raised with positive acts of Jewish identification. Conversion to Judaism is also possible, although the requirements of the various movements differ.

⁴ For explanations as to why Jewish girls are not, and never have been, circumcised, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵ Details on both home and synagogue-centered rituals, with examples, are noted in "B'rit Bat: Ceremony for Welcoming a Baby Girl" (<https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/birth-rituals/brit-bat-ceremony-welcoming-baby-girl>)

⁶ The term "Jew by choice" is contested by some who note social factors influencing the decision to join the Jewish people, the sense that they felt compelled to join the Jewish people, so the matter was not a "choice," and the notice that ethnic Jews also need to "choose" to continue to affiliate. See Philologus, "The False Ideas in the Phrase 'Jew by Choice,'" *Mosaic Magazine* (July 2016).

The erasure of Jesus's Jewish identity by his followers, coupled with the view that baptism erased an initial ethnic identity and created a third race, neither Jew nor gentile, prevailed in late antiquity.⁷ The Inquisition, with its concern for *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), did not see baptism as erasing Jewish identity and so restricted Catholic converts from holding certain offices or joining certain ecclesial bodies. The rise of racial "science" in the nineteenth century sought to distinguish Jews biologically/genetically from the gentile majority.

Jesus was a Jew—by nature (ethnically), nurture, practice, and both internal and external identification—and all aspects of this identity can bear import for both Jews and Christians today. This paper argues that (a) Jesus's *nature*, his ethnic identification, connects him with Jews then and through history; (b) Jesus's *nurture*, the Jewish life in which he was embedded, continues this connection; (c) Jesus's *lifestyle*, his personal and positive decision to live as a Jew as well as (d) his recognition as a Jew by non-Jews, commends him to Jews today as part of our history; (e) that Jesus is recognized as a Jew by both (most) Jews and (most) Christians has implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

What these categories of Jesus's Jewish identity mean for Christians will depend on what Christians find needful or helpful. In general, this meaning or, better, utility, has been found in historical or ethical rather than theological or Christological terms. Whether for catechesis, liturgy, notes to the Bibles authorized by Bishops Councils (such as the updated version of the NABRE currently in preparation), and so on, the Jewishness of Jesus for Christians has been about depicting Jesus as a Jew in terms of his practice and teaching. However, the existing Christian educational approach still functions substantially according to what Philip Cunningham has called the "oppositional imagination," with the good Jesus replacing a (falsely constructed) bad Judaism.⁸ Such resources portray Jesus as transcending (docetically) his Jewish identity rather than living fully in it; thereby, they recapitulate common negative stereotypes such as an Old Testament law vs. New Testament grace dichotomy, or in seeing Jesus as correcting a Jewish system distinguished by legalism, misogyny, oppressive purity practices, xenophobia, tribalism, a corrupt and useless Temple system marked by (barbaric) sacrifice, materialism, carnality, and the absence of spirituality. Thus, while Christians today often mark Jesus as a Jew, he remains regarded as rejecting much of this identity.

The Jewishness of Jesus should also have religious or theological meaning for Christians. Perhaps such religious consideration of the Jewishness of Jesus—his devotion to Torah, including how Jews came to interpret it and to follow its *mitzvot*—would spur Christians who produce catechetical guides, deliver homilies, or

⁷ See discussion of early ethnic reasoning by Christ-followers in Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (Gender, Theory and Religion; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁸ Philip A. Cunningham, "Challenges to Imagining Jesus as a Jew" in this volume. See also Amy-Jill Levine, "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).

serve as church-based educators to take more seriously his Jewish context. Recognizing the Jewishness of Jesus should prompt Christians to develop a relationship to or understanding of the Old Testament (to use the Christian term) as a source of revelation not limited to messianic predictions. To highlight Jesus's Jewishness also includes the recognition that "God the Father" is the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so has a specific connection to the people Israel (as Paul would say, *kata sarka*, "according to the flesh"). Christians who see themselves as the heirs of ancient Israel, as the "true Israel" or "new Israel," might regard (the Jewish) Jesus as the anchor that retains the Jews' connection to the people Israel and so still under covenant with God. The Jewish Jesus can thus serve as a bulwark against replacement theology. The Jewish Jesus also demands that Christian theology recognize that Jesus is a human being embedded in a time, place, and people; he cannot be limited to a universalized Christ.

Jesus the Jew: Ethnicity

Divisions between divinity and humanity in antiquity were fluid: human beings were divinized or deified; gods became mortal; humans ascended to the heavens or descended to the underworld; the world was populated by beings that were more than human but not to be worshiped: angels and demons, Melchizedek and Metatron and Satan. The enigmatic "Angel of the Lord" (Genesis 16:7; Exodus 3:2; etc.), who is interchangeable with the God of Israel, set the scene for God's corporeal manifestation. That Jews prior to the proclamation of the resurrection saw in Jesus someone divine would not have been surprising.

Words spoken by or about Jesus regarding messianic or Trinitarian identity did not preclude him from being identified as a Jew; Jews remained Jews regardless of messianic views. Moreover, Jews remained Jews, at least in the imaginations of both Jews and non-Jews, even if they performed acts associated with gentiles such as offering libations or sacrifices to the gods, participating in Roman civic life, or eating meat offered to idols. One could only successfully deny one's Jewish identity when no one remembered or knew of one's Jewish parents and grandparents.

Similarly, gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel, such as "godfearers" who affiliated with local synagogues and took upon themselves Jewish practices such as Sabbath observance, remained gentiles. Those who converted to Judaism (however we define "Judaism"), for men signaled by circumcision, had the same rights and responsibilities as Jews-by-birth regarding such matters as participating in the Passover meal or paying the Temple tax and later the *Fiscus Iudaicus*, but in the Second Temple period they typically retained their ethnic distinctiveness. The epitome of the convert, Ruth, remained "Ruth the Moabite." The Scrolls associated with Qumran (e.g., CD 14.4,6; 1QS 5:6; 4Q267 f9v:10; 4Q268 f2:1; 4Q269 f10ii:11; 11Q19 39:5) and the Mishnah have special rules concerning converts and children of converts (e.g., *Shev* 10:9; *Yeb* 11:2; *Ketuv* 1:2,4). The book of Acts mentions Nicolaus the proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6:5); by identifying him as a proselyte, it secures his gentile identity. According to the Book of Judith, when Achior the Ammonites "saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly

in God. So he was circumcised and joined (the Greek literally means “was added to”) the house of Israel...” (Judith 14:10), his Ammonite identity remains foregrounded (Judith 5:5 [cf. 7:16-18]; 6:5; 14:5).

Jesus was Jewish, ethnically, at least on his mother’s side. Numerous factors complicate the question of his paternity: the theological claim that he is the “only begotten Son of God”; historical attempts to reconstruct plausible non-miraculous circumstances for Mary’s pregnancy such as the early polemical suggestions that she was raped or seduced, perhaps by a fellow named Panthera, perhaps by a Jew who joined the Roman army⁹; proposals that Joseph employed a legal process to acknowledge the child as his, although Jewish legal traditions of adoption are unclear for the period¹⁰; and the Gospels’ genealogies, where Matthew provides the genealogy of Joseph but Luke provides what has been traditionally understood (in order to avoid problems with discrepancies with Matthew’s genealogy and to give Mary a Davidic lineage) to be that of Mary. Whatever the circumstances of the conception, though, all the Gospels recognize Jesus as an ethnic member of the people Israel.¹¹

Regarding the question of paternity, Jesus is like all Jews also a “child of God,” since the people Israel, the Jews, are God’s children. God (or “God the Father”) is not just a universal deity; this deity has a particular connection to the people Israel and to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The expression “God of Israel” appears 222 times in the Christian canon (both Old and New Testaments). Along with frequent citations of the phrase “The Lord, the God of Israel” in the Scripture shared by Jews and Christians, there are two independent New Testament uses. The first is Matthew 15:31, where a (predominantly) gentile crowd from the region of Tyre and Sidon, acknowledging the healings Jesus performed, “praised the God of Israel.” That is, they praise the God that is not *theirs*. The second is Luke 1:68, the

⁹ On Panthera, see *t. Chullin* 2:22-24; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.32, 69. The name Panthera may be a play on the term *parthenos*. A first-century tombstone of a Sidonian, found in Germany, contains the inscription “Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera.” See discussion in Daniel J. Lasker, “Mary in Jewish Tradition,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, in press); James Tabor, *The Lost Mary: Rediscovering the Mother of Jesus* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2025), 84-88.

¹⁰ Yigal Levin, “Jesus, ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of David’: The ‘Adoption’ of Jesus into the Davidic Line,” *JSNT* 28.4 (2006): 415-42.

¹¹ The Gospel narrators do not call Jesus a “Jew,” and the term “Jew” or “Jews” generally designates Jesus’s opponents. Matthew 28:15 strategically uses “the Jews” to describe people who believe the ridiculous story that the guards at the tomb admitted to falling asleep on watch (something no Roman soldier would do and live to talk about it). The NRSVue translates the Greek as “Judean,” although it reads “Jew” for all of Matthew’s other uses of the same term, *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi*. When the Samaritan woman asks Jesus in John 4:9, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” and John (or the woman herself; the sentence can be variously punctuated) adds that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” the identification of Jesus as a “Jew” proves false for the Gospel. First, by sharing hospitality with the Samaritans, Jesus demonstrates he is not a “Jew.” Second, in the next verse Jesus tells the woman that she does not know who he is: “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water’” (John 4:10). Third, in John 8, a chapter also about paternity, Jesus acknowledges the Jews’ claim to have Abraham as their father (8:37) only to undercut the claim in 8:44 when he states, “You are from your father the devil.”

Benedictus, where Zechariah exclaims, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” The “his people” in literary context means, at first, the people Israel, the Jews. Christian interpreters will then read the redemption as self-referential.

The New Testament also refers to God as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; Acts 3:13; 7:32).¹² The Christian biblical tradition thus affirms that the God it proclaims has a special relationship to the Jewish people, and that the Jewish people have a special relationship to this God.

According to Paul, gentile Christ-followers can regard themselves as children of Abraham: in Galatians 3:29, Paul tells his gentile audience, “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.”¹³ However, these gentile followers of Jesus are not the children also of Isaac and Jacob, and they are not, at least according to Paul, part of “Israel.”¹⁴

This biblical God is both particular and universal, immanent and transcendent. Hence, if Jesus is to be regarded as God’s son, like God in every way (so the Gospel of John), then it would follow that Jesus too has a special relationship with the Jewish people both essentially (ethnically) and existentially (by performance) because so does the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Christian theological terms, Jesus is not simply the “only begotten” son of the one God of the universe; he is also the son of the God of Israel, the God particularly associated with and worshiped by the Jewish people.

This theological particularity concerns the Incarnation. Since the Jewish tradition of matrilineal descent likely post-dates the NT,¹⁵ one might conclude that Jesus has no Jewish identity because he does not have a Jewish father. Such a conclusion would be false not only in terms of practice, e.g., he is circumcised on the 8th day

¹² Paula Fredriksen, “How Jewish is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul’s Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137.1 (2018): 193-212.

¹³ Contrast the ethnically exclusive use of the same term in 4 Maccabees 18:1: “O Israelite children, offspring of the seed of Abraham, obey this law and exercise piety in every way” (NRSVue)

¹⁴ Although Galatians 6:16, “As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God,” is typically adduced to suggest that the followers of Jesus are the “Israel of God,” the sentence indicates two distinct groups, “Those who will follow this rule” and “the Israel of God.” Elsewhere, Paul distinguishes Israel as a group “according to the flesh,” or ethnic Jews (see Romans 9:4-5). See Matthew V. Novenson, *Paul and Judaism at the End of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024), ch. 7, “Camal Israel” (160-86).

¹⁵ The origins and rationale remain debated. *M. Qidd.* 3:12 hints at it by teaching, “But any situation in which a woman has no right to enter into betrothal with this man or with any other man—the offspring is in her status. And what is such a situation? It is the offspring of a slave girl or a gentile girl.” *B. Yevamot* 23a is clearer. See, for example, Shaye J.D. Cohen, “The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law,” *AJS Review* 10.1 (1985): 19-53; Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, “Matrilineity - a Survival of Polygyny,” *Judaism* 34.1 (Winter 1985): 115-117; Susan Sorek, “Mothers of Israel: Why the Rabbis Adopted a Matrilineal Principle,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal* 3.1 (2002) at <https://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/197>. See also Maren R Niehoff, “Jewish identity and Jewish mothers: who was a Jew according to Philo?” *Studia Philonica Annual: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* 11 (1999): 31-54.

(Luke 2:21), but also in terms of legality. The Gospels understand him to be Joseph's son: the genealogies are of Joseph; he is regularly referred to as such (Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:22; John 1:45 cf. 6:42). This conclusion is also false in terms of the identity of his "Father." Confirming these Gospel points is Paul, who proclaims that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4). The only begotten child of God is therefore maternally and paternally Jewish.

On the historical side, Timothy provides the test case. Acts 16:3 notes, "Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." Because the Jerusalem Council, depicted in the previous chapter (Acts 15:19), states that gentile members of the assemblies gathered in Jesus's name need not be circumcised, and because Paul himself condemns the practice by gentiles (Galatians 2:3-5; 5:2-11), Timothy must be a specific case: the child of a gentile father and a Jewish mother.

To recognize Jesus the Jew is, for Christians, a way of reasserting the particularity of the God they worship: the God of (the people) Israel, who becomes incarnated into a Jewish body. It is an entry into recognition and so, ideally, respect for the Jewish people as a people and so a corrective to the centuries of seeing Jews as children of the devil (John 8:44). It is a prompt toward celebrating ethnic particularity, whether the Jewish particularity of Jesus, or the German, Italian, Kenyan, Peruvian, Tahitian...identity of people who worship Jesus as Lord.

For Jews, Jesus's Jewishness may be another early indication of the principal of matrilineal descent. For Jews, Jesus is one of us. When I was a child, my grandmother would watch game shows, and after I finished whatever school assignment I had, I would watch with her. Were the contestant to be named "Cohen" or "Goldberg" or something otherwise apparently identifiable as Jewish,¹⁶ my grandmother expressed hope that the contestant would win and voiced pride when the win was secured. People have a sense of ethnic solidarity and celebration, and Jews, as an *ethnos*, participate in this same process. We have every reason to claim Jesus (and Paul, and Peter, and James, and all the Marys...).

Jesus the Jew: Nurture

The ethnic category is (more or less) immutable; one's *ethnos* is a matter of fate. Jesus is a Jew in the body, *kata sarka*; he grew in a Jewish womb. He is also a Jew according to how his parents raised him. "When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21). This Jewish identity is preserved in his *resurrected body* as well, at least according to the earliest traditions that preserve such accounts. This resurrected body is a circumcised body. Just as it

¹⁶ The approach is not entirely successful, with actress Whoopi Goldberg (original name Caryn Elaine Johnson) being an excellent negative example.

bears the wounds of the cross, so, by implication, it bears the mark of circumcision.¹⁷

Luke writes about the infant Jesus's presentation in the Temple, "When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons'" (Luke 2:22-24). The details secure the connection of the baby to Jewish tradition in at least seven ways. First, the reference to "their" purification—likely including the baby as well as the mother—may hint at a now-lost Jewish practice.¹⁸ Second, the "Law of Moses" or the Torah, here referring to purification rituals described in Leviticus 12, is Luke's first of nine such references. The reference demonstrates the import both of the Torah and specifically of its rituals, not only for Jews, but also, by extension, for anyone who worships Jesus. That Christians today do not participate in some of these Jewish rituals does not mean they become meaningless. Instead, this mention could encourage respect for rather than dismissal of non-Christian rites. It could also enhance specifically Christian practices associated with birth, and even lead to more attention to mothers.¹⁹ Third, along with Leviticus 12, which concerns the purification of women after childbirth, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple could be connected to the *pidyon ha-ben*, the "redemption of the first-born" (described in Exodus 13:2,12,15; Numbers 18:15-16; Nehemiah 10:36) and practiced by Jews to this day on the thirty-first day after the birth of a firstborn son who is not of either priestly (*Cohanim*) or Levitical descent (determined patrilineally). Thus, Luke not only shows the continuity of Jesus and Jewish tradition but also offers Christians an opportunity to recognize the continuity of the Torah practice (e.g., circumcision, redemption of the first born, attention to Jerusalem) by Jews from antiquity to the present. Fourth, Jerusalem's appearance both at the beginning and the ending of Luke's Gospel connects Jesus to the "holy city" and so can help Christians understand the import of Jerusalem, and again, by extension, the land of Israel, for Jews.²⁰ Fifth, the "Lord" is explicitly the God of Israel who gave the Torah to the Jews. Sixth, the quotation is a paraphrase of Exodus 13:2 and so again connects Jesus to the Torah. It also shows how

¹⁷ On the utility of circumcision to deny Docetism, see Andrew Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Matthew Thiessen, "Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12, and Parturient Impurity," *Novum Testamentum* 54.1 (2012): 16-29.

¹⁹ Such as the tradition of "churching," a ritualized blessing given to mothers usually forty days after parturition. Better understanding of Jewish purity laws would facilitate correction of the possible association of this ritual with women's "impurity" (taken as a negative). See Natalie Knödel, "Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite: The Churching of Women and Feminist Liturgical Theology," *Feminist Theology* 5.14 (1997) at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/096673509700001406>; Liesbet Duerinck Van Gysegem, "Rite for the Introduction and Healing of Women After Childbirth," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44.4 (2017): 43-47 (and notes).

²⁰ By extension, it can help them see the import of the land of Palestine for the Palestinians, and of other connections between land and ethnicity.

Jews, then and now, interpreted the text. Seventh, Luke stresses the “law of the Lord,” that is, the Torah. The Law of Moses is the Law of the Lord. There is no subordinationist view here, in contrast to Galatians 3:19 that refers to the Torah as “ordained through angels by a mediator.”

Jewish nurturing continues throughout Jesus’s childhood. Luke 2:41 states, “every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.” The Jewishness of Jesus is connected to the Jewishness of Mary and Joseph. Along with being queen of heaven, Mary is, for the church, also the physical Jewish mother of a Jewish child. She participates in Jewish rituals, and she chooses to raise Jesus as a Jew.

Christians can see the New Testament as honoring Jewish rituals such as circumcision and Passover celebrations. This honor does not mean that Christians today should participate in such practices; by Paul’s terms, they should not, since they are not to convert to Judaism. They remain gentiles, not Jews, although they worship the God of Israel. But they can learn about and respect Jewish tradition, rather than regard it as weird, as carnal, or as outmoded. And in this respect, they may gain a deeper love for the Jewish Jesus, the Torah, and the God of Israel.

Finally, Jesus’s Jewishness makes him necessarily “other” to the gentiles in Christian churches today²¹ and so should be a warning against antisemitism and Christian nationalism. He stands against white privilege and even gentile Christian privilege, since as a first-century Jew in the Roman Empire, he was in the minority. His crucified body was a Jewish body, and so he reminds his followers of the horrors of state-sponsored violence that begins by “othering” a conquered land and colonized people. And his Jewish body suggests that his followers should, if they claim to worship him, seek to understand Jewish practice and belief both in antiquity and today.

Jesus the Jew: Practice and so Free Will

In the late Second-Temple period (as well as before and subsequently), Jews had various ways of enacting Jewish life. Priestly status was (and is) immutable.²² One could not “choose” to be a priest; only sons of priests can be priests. But a priest need not, and often because of the surplus of priests could not, always serve at the Temple. The priest who sold ceramics in Antioch or was enslaved in Rome was just as much a priest as the one who served at the altar in Jerusalem.

For the Pharisees and the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, identity was constructed primarily in terms of practice. While they were all Jews, practice determined the type of Jew they were. One was not born a Pharisee (in Acts 23:6, Paul identifies himself as a “Pharisee, a son of Pharisees”—the expression more likely indicates membership in a group than biological descent); rather, one joined the movement, as one would join a voluntary society in antiquity or today. Such

²¹ See Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²² As with most legal systems, there are exceptions. For example, priests who marry divorced women lose their priestly status, as do any children from that marriage.

practice-determined identity was probably of greater concern, and more prominent, in the diaspora, where assimilation was encouraged and where not everyone in the neighborhood ate the same food, attended the same voluntary societies, or worshiped the same gods.²³ Outside the land of Israel, Jews needed to be more intentional about preserving identity.

Jesus was a Jew by nature/ethnicity, nurture, and performance. The third category means that he chose to live his life in conformity with Jewish practice. He could have rejected community life and decamped to the Judean desert as did Josephus's desert-based ascetic teacher Banus (*Life* 11) or the people who lived in the Qumran caves. Jesus could have taken the stance of the radical allegorists Philo rails against and so rejected Jewish practices of kashrut and circumcision. He could have moved to the Diaspora and participated in several pagan organizations.

Jesus could have apostatized and so rejected Jewish practice, as did Tiberius Julius Alexander, Philo's nephew. In *Antiquities* 20.100, Josephus notes that this Roman governor of Judea, following Fadus, was the "son of Alexander the alabarch [chief magistrate of the Jews] of Alexandria," but that he "did not continue in the ancestral (πάτριος) customs (ἔθος)." For Josephus, practice does not define ethnicity since "the ancestors" remain recognized. For the rabbis, and for most Jews to this day, an apostate is still a Jew. There is no re-conversion ceremony for individuals who leave the Jewish community and seek to return.²⁴ Jesus is raised, lives, and dies a Jew, and is recognized as such by other Jews. Even were he an apostate, he would still be a Jew indelibly under halakhic understanding: a misguided Jew, yes; a bad Jew, yes, even to the point of exclusion from Jewish communal life,²⁵ but a Jew all the same.

A version of this view concerning the relationship between ethnicity and apostasy appears in Tacitus's *Histories* 5.5.1-2. The Roman historian (c. 56- c. 120 CE), no friend of the Jews, writes:

The customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity: for the worst rascals among other peoples, despising the ancestral customs/religions of his country (*nam pessimus quisque spretis religionibus patriis*) always kept sending tribute and contributing to Jerusalem... Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.

²³ See Daniel R. Schwartz, "Jewish Movements of the New Testament Period," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).

²⁴ Although some medieval European Jewish communities instituted one. The tradition is local (*mitag*, "custom," not legal (*halakhah*)). See, for instance, Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Returning Apostates and Their Marital Partners in Medieval Ashkenaz," in *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World*, ed. Yaniv Fox and Yosi Yisraeli (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 160-174.

²⁵ The prime example is Elisha ben Abuya, declared a heretic but still acknowledged at least in some rabbinic sources as a fellow Jew. See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach* (Controversions: Jews and Other Differences; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

For Tacitus, ancestral customs define an individual – these people who renounce their customs are not Jews; they are, for Tacitus, at best misguided pagans. In antiquity and, for Jews, to this day, Jewish identity need not be enacted in order to be recognized.²⁶ Tacitus also indicates that Jews in the Diaspora were not lesser Jews than those in Judea; some continued to follow their ancestral customs, and they did so publicly.

Performance is something one chooses. Jesus chooses to perform Judaism: wearing tzitzit (Matthew 9:20; 14:36; Mark 6:56; Luke 8:44), teaching in synagogues (Matthew 12:9; 13:54; Mark 1:21; 3:1; 6:2; Luke 4:16, etc.), worshiping in the Jerusalem Temple which he calls his Father’s house (Luke 2:49; John 2:16), and spending most of his time in Judea and the Galilee, the national Jewish homeland. This behavior does not make him “more Jewish” vs. a supposed “less Jewish” identity of the apostate or the allegorizer, let alone the Diaspora Jew.

Further, Jesus does everything to maintain and enhance his Jewish identity. For example, rather than reject Torah or see it as having only an allegorical or a temporary meaning, Jesus insists that the Torah is both practical and eternal. He intensifies the *mitzvot*: the commandment against murder he extends to forbid anger; the commandment against adultery he extends to forbid lust, etc. (see Matthew 5:21-48). He reinforces rather than abrogates purity laws by restoring people to ritual purity, whether drying up a woman’s vaginal or uterine bleeding and touching a corpse to restore it to life (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56), or healing people suffering from skin disease (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-44; Luke 5:12-14; 17:11-19). In disagreeing with Pharisees over such matters as Sabbath observance (Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:1-11) and handwashing (Matthew 15.1-20; Mark 7.1-23), he participates in Jewish debate rather than leaving the community. Regarding the Torah’s permanence, he admonishes according to Matthew 5:17-18, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For amen (NRSVue ‘truly’) I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota (NRSVue ‘letter’), not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law (NRSVue ‘law’) until all is accomplished.”

The performative point also matters since, in the Gospels, Jesus never asks his followers to do anything he would not do. Rather, he sets the model of how they should behave. The first conclusion is that Jewish followers of Jesus, were they to be consistent with this Gospel message, should retain their Jewish identity by self-identification, by recognition by non-Jews as being Jewish, and by practice. This point has import for Jewish followers of Jesus, then and now: neither Jesus nor Paul expects them to cease their identification as Jews. On this question, the Jewishness of Jesus offers a challenge to the Epistle to the Ephesians (which I take to be Deutero-Pauline); Ephesians 2:14-16 insists that “...in his flesh he has made both into

²⁶ Jewish identity can be inescapable, even if an individual does not do (action) anything to indicate this identity. Ethnicity does not require action.

one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” To abolish the law means to eliminate Jewish practice and so Jewish identity. While ethnicity is immutable in any given generation, after three generations of non-identification, with people held together by no distinct practices, that identity disappears. One takeaway here is that churches with Jewish members should not expect those Jewish members to reject whatever Jewish practices—Sabbath observance, kashrut, etc.—they seek to retain. The point is particularly relevant for messianic Jews who worship in Christian churches.

For Christians, these details suggest at least four additional points of interest. First, they correct the stereotype that Jesus came to abolish Jewish practice. He is not a “radical rule breaker” (the popular moniker for a number of Christians seeking a Jesus relevant in the twenty-first century) but a conservative Torah-follower.

Second, because Jesus does not do away with Torah, neither should his gentile followers. While they, as Paul insists, are not to convert to Judaism but to remain members of the nations, they are still to follow those commandments that are not designed to keep Jews distinct (e.g., circumcision, kashrut). By extension, the affirmation of Torah should correct the common stereotype of the “Old Testament God of wrath vs. New Testament God of love.” This recognition should also prevent the denigration of the “Old Testament” in the Church and should prevent the incipient Marcionism that continues to infect Christian preaching and teaching.

Third, that Jesus honors Jewish practice should, once again, lead Christians today to honor contemporary Jewish practice such as circumcision, kashrut, Sabbath and holiday observance, or forms of ritual purity, rather than ridicule it, or see it as fleshly and material rather than (the more exalted) spiritual (contrast the Epistle of Barnabas and Justin Martyr).

Fourth, Jesus’s affirming of the traditions of his people opens the door for a multicultural church. While according to Paul and consistent with dominant Jewish eschatological speculation, when the messianic age arrives (for Christians, it arrives with Jesus) the nations are to turn from whoever or whatever they worship to worship the God of Israel alone, they might still retain their cultural practices concerning food, seasonal celebrations (in some cases, such as with Christmas trees and Eastern eggs, rebranded away from non-Israelite theology), language, and other distinct markers.

Why Performance Matters: on Judaism and Gender

To argue that the Jewish body of Jesus, qua Jewish, matters opens the possibility that its other particulars, especially its maleness, also matters. In one respect, the penis matters, since only the penis can be circumcised in Jewish practice. However, I do not want to foreground the male body of Jesus as having major theological import. Such foregrounding risks placing women in a theologically subordinated or marginal position.

Jesus promotes Jewish practice, but he does not promote male hegemony. He rejects the patriarchal household and so what today falls under the category of “hegemonic masculinity” by not marrying and fathering children and by redefining his family as consisting of “mothers and brothers and sisters” (Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35). His gender-fluid body births the church with the blood and water of parturition (John 19:34); he commends eunuchized identity (Matthew 19:12) and so diminishes the import of doing anything with, or even of having, a penis and testicles.

Jesus rejects the eschatological assignments of male and female (Matthew 22:23-33 pars). However, he does not reject the eschatological distinctiveness of Jews or of the city of Jerusalem. Resurrection of the body is a Jewish, not pagan, concept. His promise to return to Jerusalem, not Rome or Antioch, shows Jewish geographical priority.²⁷ He anticipates eschatological dining with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not with Prometheus or Zeus.²⁸ He promises his disciples that “at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”²⁹ and so presumes a distinctively Jewish component in the world-to-come.

Conclusion

Jesus has no religious or theological meaning for Jews, but he can serve to help Jews recover more of our teaching and form an historical and ethical bridge between Jews and Christians today; he can remind us of the importance of Jewish ethnic identity, nurture, and practice.

For Christians, Jesus *qua* Jew has religious meaning. The incarnate Lord is incarnated in a Jewish body, engages in Jewish practice, and is the son of a Jewish (as well as universal) God. Because the flesh matters, the particular Jewish flesh must matter as well. Because free will and thus choice matter, the choice Jesus makes to live a fully Jewish life must matter as well. To worship a Jewish God and a Jewish Christ³⁰ means to recognize a connection to Jewish bodies and Jewish practices. At the least, this recognition shows why the condemnation of antisemitism is not simply a moral issue; for the Christian it is a religious and theological one as well.

²⁷ So Matthew 23:37-38; Luke 13:34-35.

²⁸ Matthew 8:11; see also Luke 13:28.

²⁹ Matthew 19:28; see also Luke 22:30.

³⁰ On the role of the Spirit, see Amy-Jill Levine, “Four Questions on the Trinity, Pneumatology, and Jewish-Christian Relations,” in Reimund Bieringer, Peter De Mey, Ma. Marilou S. Ibita and Didier Pollefeyt (eds.), *The Spirit, Hermeneutics, and Dialogues* (Annuua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 76; Leuven/Paris/Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2019).