SCJR 21, no. 1 (2026): 1-15

Thinking and Dialoguing about Jesus the Jew: A Semiotic Christology

Part of a special volume on the "Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ" Research Project

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1. Introduction: A Semiotic Approach to Christology

For nearly two millennia, Christians and Jews have regularly found each other's beliefs and practices bewildering.

In Judaism, the question has been repeatedly discussed whether the Christian worship of a Jew named Jesus (whom Christians also designate as "Christ") constitutes *avodah zarah*, the idolatrous, false adoration of something or someone other than the One God of Israel.[1] Christians, for their part, were and are often mystified by the Jewish rejection of the church's convictions about Jesus that to them seem indisputable since they derive from Jews' own scriptures.[2]

This essay posits that a "semiotic christology" makes a major contribution to overcoming such reciprocal Jewish and Christian incredulity about their respective views of Jesus. It is not that Jews and Christians will suddenly agree with everything held by the other community. Rather, thinking semiotically enables both to be better able to maintain their own distinctive and defining viewpoints while also respecting the reasonableness of each other's stances—and perhaps learn from them.

Semiosis, from the Greek *semeion* or sign, is how human beings use symbols or signs to make sense of the world and communicate with one another. Semiotics studies this dynamic of meaning-making as an interaction between symbols and the people who view or read them. For example, an arrow indicates a direction (iconic sign). The arrow can mark a trail that leads in a certain direction and represents a

[1] The dominant view among most Jews today seems to be that Christian "associations" of Jesus with the divine is not *avodah zarah* for Christians but it would be for Jews.

[2] See Marc Brettler and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: HarperOne, 2020) for more on the different interpretations of the Tanakh/Old Testament by Jews and Christians.

danger or leads to a destination (indexical sign). The sign can take on a symbolic meaning if, in a figurative sense, one follows the person who has gone down this path. It stresses that all speech and all languages are symbolic. Language is seen as an evolving convention of symbols that are standardized among groups of people to enable thought and communication. As symbols, words are multivalent and can both reveal and conceal that to which they refer. Thus, as an instrument of execution, the cross can be a symbol of violent death, but for Christians it also points to the resurrection of the crucified Christ. Inescapably, this reality holds true for the articulation of religious communal traditions. This includes both rabbinic modes of discourse and the church's christological speech, each of which tries to sanctify life and connect it with God as the Holy One and the Creator of life. The symbolic nature of language grapples with transcendent ideas over time in a complex process of meaning-making—one that must be undertaken anew in each generation.

This essay examines christology and Christian-Jewish relations by underscoring that a language is a symbol system that enables viewers or readers to construct meaning from hearing or reading words. An ancient text in unknown hieroglyphics will mean little to practically anyone who sees it today. However, the discovery of a Rosetta Stone allows the rendering of the hieroglyphics into a familiar symbol system. Even then, the newly readable text can contain unknown allusions and references that obscure whatever it meant to its author. Semiotically speaking, the distinction between a sign and the context of the people who give it meaning must always be kept in mind.

2. Our Project's Meta-Question

The driving inquiry behind all the essays in this collection is: *What is the importance of the Jewish identity of Jesus for Christians and for Jews today and for their interrelationship?* This "meta-question" implies an interest in intergroup understanding. As will be discussed below, this interest was derived from and intensified by a shift in the last century from an exclusivist to an inclusivist understanding in the way many Christians conceived of the church. The meta-question has a further implication that results from the history of Jewish and Christian relations: the purpose of dialogue is to understand one another—not to persuade one another in a conversionary sense. The meta-question also presupposes that Jesus's Jewishness can *legitimately* be apprehended in different ways by Jews and Christians. Semiotically speaking, this is because their understandings of him are the result of analogous processes of meaning-making that are embedded, however, in their respective Jewish and Christian reception histories and identities. As we will see, this approach establishes a framework within which the similarities and differences of the Jewish and Christian approaches to Jesus can be clarified.

The signs employed in the meta-question, such as the terms "Jewish," "identity," or "Christ" become meaningful only through the process of semiosis by

which signs come to express something real for their viewers.[3] All signs receive and have their meanings altered by their "reception" or being engaged by readers in changing environments over time. They thus constantly and automatically generate new interpretations of written texts. This point becomes particularly important when considering the frameworks through which Jews and Christians uncover meanings in ancient scriptures.

This essay proposes that the sign "Christ" as the Christian creation of meaning in relation with the sign "God" can be (re)constructed to be theologically comprehensible, though not endorsed, from the perspective of Jewishly understood monotheism.

It is important to note from the outset, however, that from a Christian point of view, *christology as formative part of faith is fully meaningful only in a living relation to Christ*.[4] This poses a problem for Christians conversing with Jews: without the performative moment, the "decision of faith" that God raised Jesus, christology for Jews is the strange activity of other people. Christians might, e.g., cognitively try to clarify why trinitarian theology need not contradict monotheism, but their explanations will likely seem alien and unnecessary to their Jewish interlocutors. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, a leading Modern Orthodox Talmudist and philosopher, expressed this disconnect by observing that when speaking in terms of faith, "where total unconditional commitment and involvement are necessary," religious faiths are by "their very nature incommensurate and related to different frames of reference," so that for him the idea of meaningful communication across religious lines "is utterly absurd."[5] But if that were true, then how can Christians and Jews who engage in interreligious dialogue sometimes report that they have been spiritually touched by their exchanges with each other? This is a question that semiotic approaches to christology can elucidate.

3. Semiotic Christology in Time and Space

Semiotically, christology represents a process of meaning-making through which the life and message of Jesus can be theologically illuminated. However, since no linguistic expression can exhaust the reality to which it refers, in this case Jesus in relation to "God," christology must also accept its own limitations in being able to access fully the relationship of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth to the equally ineffable sign "God."

[3] Sometimes in this essay, therefore, certain terms are placed within quotation marks when it seems helpful to recall the semiotic principle that all human words are symbols.

[4] This does not mean that the New Testament cannot also be understood from a religious and cultural studies perspective or from another religious perspective. What is meant here is the perspective of the reader who feels existentially summoned to put this faith into lived action.

[5] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, 6/2 (1964): 5-29 at 22. https://traditiononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Confrontation.pdf

Additionally, we must consider the temporal dimension. Behind the question of the "Jewish identity" of Jesus today are centuries-old traditions of different interpretations of Jesus, both Christian and Jewish.[6] This pluralism of approaches is historically inescapable and, in this respect, affects the possibility of how the meta-question can be answered today. Since meaning or significance develops only in relation to people using a particular linguistic symbol system, the meta-question is about how the *interpretation* of Jesus as a Jew is done from the perspective of the differences between Jews and Christians in the past and today. This suggests that the answer to the question of Jesus's Jewish identity in and between the two communities is such that perhaps it must always remain open-ended.

A crucial moment in defining for the church the meaning of its core linguistic symbol "Christ" occurred with the decree of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. That text spoke of the unseparated and unmixed human and divine natures of Jesus Christ.[7] Notably, it determined the meaning of "Christ" in terms of Jesus *in his relationship to God*. "Christ" is, therefore, not primarily an ontological or metaphysical formula about a state of being, but the expression of a *living relationship*.

The symbolic nature of language, specifically christological language, is unavoidable for theology, both in terms of the ongoing linguistic process of communicating ideas and the inherent differences between the sign and that which is signified. The specific terms "Christ" and "christology" developed in this process of meaning-making over the centuries, already evident in the Christian translation and transformation of the Jewish concept "messiah." A semiotic christology will discern, e.g., that twenty-first century theologies of the relationship between the Jewish and Christian traditions can no longer facilely overlay "messiah" and "Christ" onto each other. The term "Christ" carries a different meaning in Christian reception history than "messiah" in both late Second Temple Jewish and post-70 CE rabbinic thought.[8]

To speak of Jesus in relationship to God also says something about what God does in relationship to Jesus. For Christians, Jesus as the "Christ" is a Jew in whom the unlimited creative and animating power of God comes alive in a humanly embodied way. Christians discern this creative power in Jesus of Nazareth. Semiotically, "Christ" is a term that continuously enables, indeed demands, new interpretations of the written traditions of Israel. Indeed, as the German Catholic

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[6] E.g., see Jehoschua Ahrens's survey of Jewish interpretations of Jesus in the 18th through 20th centuries elsewhere in this collection.

[7] See Gregor Maria Hoff, "A Realm of Differences: The Meaning of Jewish Monotheism for Christology and Trinitarian Theology," in Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik, eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids: Willim B. Eerdmans, 2011), 202-220.

[8] Philip A. Cunningham suggests that the Hebrew word "messiah" be applied to current Jewish expectations of an eschatological Coming One and that the Greek word "Christ" denote the Church's experience of God's Word incarnated in the human life, death, resurrection, and continuing glorified life of the first-century Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. See his "Gifts and Calling: Coming to Terms with Jews as Covenantal Partners," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12/1 (2017): 1-18 at 14-16.

bishops wrote in 1980, "He who encounters Christ encounters Judaism,"[9] which can properly refer to his own Jewishness, post-biblical Judaism, and Jewish life today.

A semiotic christology reimagines the more static and timeless models of classical ontological christology that are concerned with metaphysical "being-ness." Semiotically, even transcendent statements about Christ as pre-existent and consubstantial (of the same being) with God need to be reconceived as symbolic expressions of the divine-human relationship. Importantly, *this raises the possibility of articulating symbolic meanings about the divine-human relationship that "make sense" in both Judaism and Christianity and so make what Christians mean by "Christ" more reasonable to Jews.*

Thus, when Christian theology speaks of the human incarnation of God, the term "human" functions as a modifier of the term "God" insofar as "human" provides theological accessibility to God's divine transcendence. However, there ultimately arises a moment when it becomes clear that language cannot fully grasp or articulate divine transcendence. Neither can it fully plumb the meaning of humanity. Thinking in certain classical Greek binary terms about "God" and "humanity" inevitably demands that a certain "transgression" occur when wishing to speak of them as somehow connected. They cannot be related if conceived dualistically as utterly different.

This explains why the classic christological tradition expressed in ontological terms is less helpful in meeting the theological challenges of the Christian and Jewish relationship today and why semiotic concepts better address the contemporary church's theological needs.[10]

If, as noted above, christology is performative, predicated on the "decision of faith" that God raised Jesus, then similarly what Jesus is remembered as *doing* must inform how christology relates him to "God" and so how Christians should act today. For Christians, therefore, Jesus can be understood as embodying his message about the "kingdom of God" (Origen expressed this with the word "*autobasileia*" or the "kingdom within himself").[11] The message of Jesus is a performative word: he heals, has fellowship meals, reaches out to the vulnerable, and is willing to risk his life on behalf of "God's kingdom," itself a sign pointing to a transcendent reality. Jesus's deeds, therefore, must guide and permeate the semiotic process of theologizing about "Christ" and "God." It follows that Christian-Jewish dialogue about Jesus is also performative: it impacts their present interrelationship by making sense of their respective "signs."

Jesus's Jewish identity consists in the fact that, as a member of Israel, the people of God, he teaches and keeps the Torah. Because Jesus interprets Torah in his

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[9] (West) German Bishops' Conference, "The Church and the Jews," in Franklin Sherman, *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue.* Volume 1. *The Road to Reconciliation (1845-1985)* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press/Stimulus Books, 2011), 239.

[10] On the related topic of the historical conditioning of dogma, see a 1973 text from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html

[11] Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mathew*, Migne PG 13, 1197.

own way, which the Gospels present as authorized by God, then his identity as a Jew can be defined as a process of interpretation bound up with the Torah. Hence, his identity is only discernible in the process of various connections: (1) with the Torah and the people of God, Israel;[12] (2) with the prophetic and messianic traditions within which he speaks and acts; (3) with the God of Israel of whom Jesus speaks in his parables and utterances about the kingdom of God; and (4) with physical or incarnate manifestations of God's will in his healings and mighty deeds.[13]

From a Christian perspective, then, the Jesus traditions of the Gospels can be understood as a performance of Jewish faith in service to God's unlimited creative power of life. This in turn has the consequence that these stories themselves are to be opened up again and again for the understanding of God as creative life power.[14] If the Jesus story represents an "open narrative,"[15] the possibility of making connections for ongoing interpretations of Jesus and christology in the dialogue between Jews and Christians arises. (It also means that christology must consider the sign or significance of the Jewish "no" to Christ.)

4. A Changed Interreligious Context

In grappling with the meta-question semiotically—since semiotics takes cognizance of the changing worlds within which meaning is constructed—it must be recognized that the twentieth century brought about a permanent shift of position about Jews in major branches of Christianity. This shift is both theological (how Christians understand their relation to God) and practical (in terms of the dialogue with Jews and Judaism). As a result of this shift, Jews and Christians in significant numbers now candidly discuss theological topics that earlier generations would, with rare exceptions, have avoided. This includes our meta-question. Such avoidance can be seen in earlier Catholic cautions to avoid Jewish "spiritual contagion"[16] and in the reservations of Joseph Soloveitchik mentioned above. However, in today's changed climate the potential to inspire one another spiritually across religious lines is sometimes realized.

The twentieth century shift and its relevance for the question of Jesus's Jewish identity is dramatically evident in the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church's 1965 Declaration *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), whose sixtieth anniversary has just occurred. That document bears on the historic reality of Jesus as first-

[12] Although portions of the NT claim that non-christological interpretations of the Torah are in error, we, following Chalcedon's distinction of the natures, suggest that while Jesus's own interpretations were apocalyptic, even messianic, in nature, they would not have been predicated upon the post-resurrectional insights that arose in the early churches.

[13] With thanks to Barbara U. Meyer during project discussions.

[14] Interestingly, this idea recalls the advice found in the rabbinic text, *Pirkei Avot* 5:22, which advises about Torah study: "Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein."

[15] See Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval (*New York/London: Continuum, 2007).

[16] See, e.g., Georges Passalecq and Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 252.

century Jew in at least two ways: to preclude any kind of Christian anti-Judaism or antisemitism, and to bring to the fore the connection of the church to its historical and theological beginnings in late Second Temple Judaism.

Nostra Aetate 4 raises and answers a question of ecclesial identity: "As this sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock."[17] This is the first time that a solemn council of the Catholic Church determines its own identity through the Jewish identity of Jesus. It continues:

> The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle [Paul] about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.[18]

Footprints along a historical journey of ecclesiastical self-identification (which in the past had taken an anti-Jewish detour) become apparent here. Semiotically understood, *Nostra Aetate* is not only about historic developments over time. The word "today" in the meta-question is crucially important because it evokes this twentieth-century shift in interreligious thinking. To put it another way, the question of the meaning of Jesus's Jewish identity emerges "in our time" only in a process of reciprocal relations between Christians and Jews. By asking the meta-question in this way, one must reckon with the christological difference between Jews and Christians, which shapes their respective perceptions of Jesus.

Jews and Christians grappled with their respective self-understandings after World War II and the Shoah in different ways. Jews obviously did not go through the same process of communal reappraisal that many Christians did. Nonetheless, the shift in Christian interreligious thinking challenged Jews with the unprecedented experience of Christians reaching out to them for non-conversionary dialogue in which their disagreements about the meaning of Jesus could theoretically be dispassionately discussed without pressuring or coercing Jewish participants.

Disagreements about Jesus are already evident in New Testament texts. They continued in the diverse history of the reception of those texts over the centuries. Today, however, many Jews and Christians think according to the recent historical paradigm that their respective understandings of the "Tanakh"[19] or the "Old Testament" are based upon creative responses to certain transformative first-century

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[17] Second Vatican Council, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*" (1965), 4.1. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

[18] *Nostra Aetate*, 4.3.

[19] "Tanakh" is a Jewish term for the scriptures of ancient Israel. It is an acronym of "*Torah*" (teaching), "*Nevi'im*" (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (writings).

events, for Jews to the devastation wrought by the two revolts against Rome (66-70 and 132-135 CE) and for some Jews and then also non-Jews, to the impact of the "Christ event."[20] This late twentieth century perspective saw these early creative developments as theologically legitimate and well-founded options for new interpretations. Moreover, people operating with this new paradigm saw that it needed to be engaged both within Jewish and Christian communities internally as well as between them. The 2015 document of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) stresses this:

> [T]here were two responses to [the events of the first two centuries CE], or more precisely, two new ways of reading Scripture, namely the christological exegesis of the Christians and the rabbinical exegesis of that form of Judaism that developed historically. Since each mode involved a new interpretation of Scripture, the crucial new question must be precisely how these two modes are related to each other. But since the Christian Church and post-biblical rabbinical Judaism developed in parallel, but also in … mutual ignorance, this question cannot be answered from the New Testament alone. After centuries of opposing positions, it has been the duty of Jewish-Catholic dialogue to bring these two new ways of reading the Biblical writings into dialogue with one another in order to perceive the "rich complementarity" where it exists and "to help one another to mine the riches of God's word" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 249). The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" in 2001 therefore stated that Christians can and must admit "that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures from the Second Temple period, *a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion.*"[21]

The CRRJ goes on to conclude that "Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible."[22] This understanding is of critical importance for the treatment of the meta-question on the Jewish identity of Jesus for two reasons. First, because it holds a canonical, scriptural dimension for Catholic theology, and second because it stimulates dialogue on Jewish-Christian commonalities and differences.

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[20] "Christ event" refers to the conviction that the God of Israel had raised the crucified Jesus to transcendent life. Those who came to believe this reread the Tanakh accordingly, whose Greek translation, the Septuagint, they eventually reorganized as the Christian "Old Testament."

[21] "'The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)," §31. Italics added. https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en.html.

[22] CRRJ, "Gifts and Calling," §22.

5. Appreciating that Christians and Jews Retrospectively Reread Scriptures

After the decisive acknowledgment that there are legitimate Jewish (rabbinic) ways of interpreting the Tanakh, the CRRJ brings the church's christological understanding to bear by saying, "Since God has never revoked his covenant with his people Israel, there cannot be different paths or approaches to God's salvation."[23] On the one hand, the CRRJ here affirms that God's covenantal relationship with Israel is undissolved and continuing. On the other hand, the title of chapter 5 of the document, "Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ," reveals what continuing Jewish covenantal life means for Christian soteriology (its understanding of "salvation"). For our project's meta-question, this means that the biblical history of revelation inherently includes the Jewish identity of the people of God and of Jesus—in and as covenantal events. This is the result of the shift in Christian views discussed above: there has been an ecclesiological change from an exclusivist posture that would see Jews as outside of the covenantal community to an inclusivist one in which Jews are fellow covenanted people of God, walking with God in a distinctively Torah-centered manner.

The analogous Christian and Jewish methods of rereading biblical writings, as highlighted by the CRRJ, lies at the heart of their christological differences. Early church christology holds that "what is not assumed is not healed."[24] This means that God's Word had to assume a human nature in order to heal sinful humanity. Therefore, for Christian theology the very possibility of "redemption" is linked to the authentic humanity of Jesus, that is, to his historical reality, even and especially as a Jew and as a member of God's chosen people. At the same time, the belief in God's incarnation in Jesus separates the church from Judaism. The open question is: How can we reconcile the fact that Israel is in covenant with God and so also has access to salvation, but that this access is without an explicit confession of Christ?[25] The CRRJ does not resolve this tension but characterizes it as God's permanent mystery.[26] It is a perpetual aporia, an irresolvable conundrum whose solution is kept eschatologically open. It will not be settled until the End of Days.[27]

There is no question that Jesus, according to the testimony of the Gospels and Paul, lived according to the commandments of the Torah; that he recognized them as the valid standard of his religious life, even if he interpreted them—again, according to the testimony of the Gospels—in his own way; that he lived as a Jew in

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[23] CRRJ, "Gifts and Calling," §35.

[24] Bradley K. Storin, trans., "Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter 101 to Cledonius," in Mark DelCogliano, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*. Vol. 3. *Christ: Through the Nestorian Controversy* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 388-398.

[25] This indeed was the meta-question in Cunningham et al, eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today.*

[26] CRRJ, "Gifts and Calling," §36.

[27] Interestingly, besides "Gifts and Calling," there is a clear tendency in post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic ecclesial texts to stress a futurist eschatology. See, e.g., *Nostra Aetate*, §4; CRRJ, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4" (1974), §II; and CRRJ, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" (1985), §II,10.

the eyes of his contemporaries and followers; and, last but not least, that he was crucified as a Jew from the point of view of the Roman imperium.

A semiotic christology insists that the reality of Jesus is bound to the signs that shape and determine his identity. *Only through such signs can the meaning of the Jewish reality of Jesus be captured. Only through such signs can the meaning of the Jewishness of Jesus for Jews and the Jewish-Christian dialogue be engaged.*

By tying human salvation to Jesus as an eschatological mystery of God, "Gifts and Calling" not only leaves open the soteriological meaning of Jesus for Israel but also sets a sign as to how the difference between Christianity and Judaism can be taken seriously theologically.[28] It is a *performative* act of Catholic teaching: it creates its own (interreligious) reality by keeping open the Christian question about Jewish salvation.[29]

The project's meta-question also encourages consideration of the different christological titles that the New Testament attributes to Jesus.[30] Since designations such as "Son of Man," "Son of God," "Christ," etc., all have precursors in pre-Jesus Jewish thought,[31] they confront us with a pluralism of forms of attribution with which the Jewish identity of Jesus is associated or through which it becomes visible. The fact that these attributions have Jewish origins and contexts illuminates the complex origins of the differences between Jews and Christians today.

This also means that Jewish interlocutors can appreciate the semiotic process by which Christians came to attribute certain characteristics to Jesus. After all, late Second Temple-era Jewish texts and the rabbinic tradition itself also employed retrospective rereadings of the Tanakh. So did early "Christians" who read Israel's scriptures (among other texts) with hindsight and drew on contemporary *Jewish* ideas about messiahs and heavenly figures in the light of their conviction that God had "raised" or "exalted" the crucified Jesus.

Such a semiotic outlook does not suggest that Jews should now think about Jesus according to the framework of Christian faith. On the contrary, it makes it possible for them to ascribe reasonableness to how Jewish and Christian differences about Jesus arose and historically developed. It enables the potential for Jews to

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[28] Something similar occurs in Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (2001), II,A,5: "The definitive fulfilment will be at the end with the resurrection of the dead, a new heaven and a new earth. Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us." https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html

[29] This new soteriological openness is apparent in Pope Francis's statement in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (§249): "God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word." https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#Relations_with_Judaism

[30] See the essay by Jesper Svartvik, "Heaven Came Down to Earth When No One Expected It" elsewhere in this collection.

[31] See Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (trans. Allison Brown; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

respect Christian christologies and for Christians to appreciate the Jewish "no" to Christ—while still identifying with their own tradition's parameters.

6. A Case in Point: Perspectives on "Incarnation"

The metaphor or sign "incarnation" is a particular topic in the discourse between Christians and Jews that can illustrate the usefulness of semiotic analysis. By linking the divine with the human, the term "incarnation" has a transcendent quality: it seeks to use limited human speech to speak of that which is beyond mortal ken. It is a representation of the unrepresentable. It requires a special inventive effort to symbolize that which inherently eludes human symbolizations, an imageless image, as it were.

This is a realization, by the way, that could lead to the prohibition of images of the divine altogether, as in the Torah (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8-9). Such a prohibition of images seeks to declare out-of-bounds what is ultimately unimaginable, or conversely, it seeks to shape what is permissible when humans try to imagine "God." This epistemic humility, the recognition of limits in what humans can conceive, is also seen in Jewish reticence to pronounce the Tetragrammaton. These are the four Hebrew letters understood in Jewish tradition to be God's sacred "name," based on Exodus 3:14. Semiotically speaking, after all, words are images or symbols, too.

The prologue of the Gospel of John is a particularly relevant text here. Its opening words, "In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*]" (John 1:1) deliberately invoke the first words found in both the Christian and Jewish bibles, "In the beginning, God …" (Gen 1:1, LXX). The Johannine verse thus points back to the beginning of everything that was created. The "Logos" itself initially remains an abstract principle of creation.

But John 1:14 goes on to make a crucial linkage: "And the Logos became flesh and lived among us." By living alongside human beings, the Logos has become tangible and, because the sign "Logos" also connotes human rationality, it performatively communicates itself in human speech to people. Thus, for this Gospel, no one has seen "God" except for the incarnated Logos who came from God. However, because the Logos metaphorically rests in the heart of the Father, everyone who sees the Logos sees "God" (1:18; 14:9).

The Johannine use of Logos-language addresses an imaginative necessity: to offer an idea of something radically transcendent, but which is immanently apprehended because it is seen and expressed in human terms and thus becomes corporeal or incarnated. The symbolic term "Logos" connects the rational organization of the cosmos and creation with the Incarnation in such a way that the specifically Christian form of human contact with God is expressed ("the true light that which enlightens everyone was coming into the world" (1:9) so that all who share in it are "born of God" (1:13).

Crucially, the tangibility of the enfleshed Logos in Jesus lies precisely in his humanity, which for this Gospel is the true or authentic humanity. The Johannine Jesus bridges the divine and human realms, the transcendent and the immanent, the world above and the world below (8:23). In other words, this Jesus brings to life

(1:4) God's life-giving creative power, which is presented to readers in a narrative that is replete with signs (the Gospel repeatedly uses the Greek word, *semeia* for Jesus's "signs"). The Jesus of John's Gospel describes himself with numerous metaphors such as the bread of life that came down from heaven (6:35, 41), the light of the world (8:12), the sheep gate (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:5).

Theologically, what is incarnated in the Johannine Jesus is God's relationship to the world as the infinite creative power of life (in the beginning and beyond death). This Jesus lives out of a unique intimacy with the Father whom he therefore in his humanity interprets for us. This image-laden narrative, incidentally, corresponds to the metaphysical language of the Council of Chalcedon: Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human. The coordination of the two "natures" is indicated with the conjunction "and." That word must be taken seriously as recognizing the connection between divinity and humanity as a relationship between God and human beings.

In terms of our meta-question, it is most significant that John 1:14 literally says "the Logos became flesh and *pitched its tent among us.*" We thus come full circle back to the biblical matrix of the language of Christian and rabbinic Jewish thought, which of course also speaks about the divine-human relationship. The scriptures of the Tanakh and the Old Testament, the respective source traditions for Jews and Christians, also wrestled with how to articulate divine-human interaction. For example, Exodus 25:8-9 portrays God telling the Israelites that they are to make a sanctuary that I may "tent" among you. Even more pertinent is a text in the deuterocanonical book of Sirach, which describes God's Wisdom surveying the earth and wondering, "in whose inheritance should I abide? Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator pitched my tent … [saying] in Israel receive your inheritance" (Sira 24:7-8). Semiotically, all these Israelite, Jewish, and Christian texts are clearly grappling with how to express the inexpressible. And they draw upon interrelated traditions, or receptions of traditions, in attempting to do so.

It was posited above that a semiotic awareness can bridge the christological divide between Jews and Christians, thus offering them the possibility of mutual spiritual enrichment. A vivid example of this appears in the writings of Michael Wyschogrod. He examines the motif of incarnation or enfleshment from a Jewish perspective, stressing that: "Israel's symbol of the covenant is circumcision, a searing of the covenant into the flesh of Israel and not only, or perhaps not even primarily, into its spirit. And that is why God's election is of a carnal people."[32] Conceiving of God's presence in terms of human physicality obviously resonates with Christian incarnational thought with which Wyschogrod explicitly interacts.

[32] See his *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (Minneapolis, Winston Press, 1983), 67 and "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 195–209. Another Jewish approach is provided by Emmanuel Levinas who subjects the concept of God's incarnation to a philosophical re-examination of alterity or otherness. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Zwischen uns: Versuche über das Denken an den Anderen* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1995), 73–82; and his *Schwierige Freiheit: Versuch über das Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1992,) 89–96 (French original: *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* [Paris: A. Michel, 1976], 124–131).

He thus exemplifies how a changed climate of discourse after the Shoah made possible "safe" Jewish engagement with the meaning of Jesus's Jewish identity for Jews and for the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Since theological disagreements were now being analyzed under these changed conditions, people realized that religious differences could not be processed adequately in a polemical mode. Thus, reciprocal possibilities of understanding arose. It is worthwhile quoting Wyschogrod at length:

> To believe that God became incarnate in Jesus the Jew is to encounter the Divine Presence in the people of Israel. The alternative is to contend that the Jewishness of Jesus was purely contingent, as was the color of his hair or his precise weight. But if the Jewishness of Jesus is not contingent, then it is—for Christians—the climax of a process that began with the election of Abraham. My claim is that the Christian teaching of the incarnation of God in Jesus is the intensification of the teaching of the indwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that indwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole. From my perspective, such a severing of any Jew from his people is a mistake because, biblically, God's covenant partner is always the people of Israel and not an individual Jew. …
>
> The doctrine of the incarnation [of Christ] thus separates Jews and Christians, but properly understood, also sheds light on the incarnational elements in Judaism which are more diffuse than the Christian version but nevertheless very real. If the Christian move was a mistake—and I believe it was—it was a mistake that has helped me better understand a dimension of Judaism—God's indwelling in the people of Israel—that I probably would not have understood as a clearly without the Christian mistake.[33]

There is much about these rich thoughts on which we could comment, but the point we wish to make is that semiotics provides a framework for understanding why such friendly interreligious comparisons have now become possible. Wyschogrod's writings notably assume many of the concepts stressed in the semiotic study of Christian-Jewish relations. For example, he maintains that "for traditional Judaism 'Torah' is the written biblical text interpreted and elaborated by the rabbis."[34] He points to the importance of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE for the perspectives of rabbinic Judaism.[35] And he recognizes the limits of human language: "There is therefore no idea that [fully] encompasses Israel because Israel is, as it were, an idea incarnated in the flesh of a people."[36] As Christian scholar R. Kendall Soulen insightfully comments, "So long as Christians do not forget the Jewishness of Jesus or remove him from his Jewish context, the

[33] Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. by R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 178.
[34] Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 72.
[35] Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 70-72.
[36] Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 128.

[christological] disagreement between Christianity and Judaism … may be understood, Wyschogrod believes, *as more one of degree than of kind*."[37]

7. Conclusion

In sum, in this essay we have emphasized that christology unavoidably develops within various interpretative perspectives and sign systems, thus illuminating that christology is a process of interpretation. Similarly, this semiotic approach contributes to understanding revelation as interpretation as well. New patterns of interpretation are constantly needed to make the christologies of the New Testament and the early church understandable. Today, this means that the church's dogmatic tradition must be open to the development of new signs and symbols in christology—in a common and differentiated Jewish-Christian approach to Jesus the Jew. By reflecting together in different religious communities on Jesus Christ in his Jewishness, dialogue forms its own framework in reference to the God of Israel—with lasting differences, but in a common process of reflection.

As a final thought, it is useful to reflect on the experiences of dialogue in the past six decades. One of the first challenges that confronted Jews and Catholics (and other Christians) after the Second Vatican Council was that neither community had much experience of sustained dialogue with one another to draw upon. Having little accurate knowledge of each other's teachings, practices, and modes of reasoning, it was easy to operate on the basis of stereotypes and caricatures. In particular, the fact that the same words could have very different meanings and valences in the two traditions was something that had to be learned through ongoing conversation and study.

A related issue was the (perhaps unconscious) fear of loss of identity through too much exposure to the other's differing views. Especially for Catholics, a historical preference for neatly stated formulas that expressed the truths of the faith for all times and places could make it hard to listen to other perspectives that were not founded on Christian convictions. For Catholics whose religious education was based upon the memorization of catechism formulations, or programs of seminary formation that similarly reified past articulations in apologetic modes, the prospect of having to answer probing questions from a closely related religious traditions was very daunting. Historically, Jewish experience of "talking religion" with Catholics could be outright dangerous. The threat of forced baptisms and humiliating public debates naturally made post-Shoah Jews skeptical and cautious about the unfamiliar post-*Nostra Aetate* invitations to dialogue from Catholics.

Be that as it may, the figure of Jesus was and remains a topic where many suspicions and fears can still surface today. This essay has hopefully demonstrated that a semiotic approach to christology can help bridge past divides. We have seen that both Judaism and Christianity call upon many linguistic "signs" that are sometimes shared even if they operate within different traditions of interpretation.

[37] Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 15. Italics added.

Among them are terms that refer to the common experience of sensing a transcendent "Presence." Among them are "Shekhinah," "Wisdom," and "Holy Spirit." Since semiotics provides a framework for exploring interreligious meaning-making, a semiotic christology might enable Christians and Jews to be more open to discerning the One who is present when they study and dialogue together, even if their respective experiences of the divine are diverse.