SCJR 21, no. 1 (2026): 1-22

A Unique Jew?: Judaism and Christology in Catholic and Protestant Theology

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

ADAM GREGERMAN
agregerm@sju.edu
Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19083

Introduction

The reality of Jesus's Jewishness is now widely recognized by scholars and church leaders (though perhaps not as widely among the general public). There are at least two reasons for this remarkable shift away from a long-lasting and widespread Christian image of Jesus as barely influenced by or even opposed to Judaism.[1] The first is the recognition that accurate historical study needs to dispense with theologically-based antipathy toward Judaism or indifference to it and accept that Jesus lived, worshipped, believed, and acted as a first century Jew. This may seem obvious to us, though as recently as 1980 Geza Vermes expressed bafflement that few Christian scholars thought "that familiarity with Judaism could assist the exegete of the New Testament."[2] Scholarly integrity required that one reject centuries-old misjudgments and biases and be open to using Jewish sources ("in a spirit of sympathy"[3]) and to challenge traditional Christian portraits that de-Judaized Jesus. The second reason for Christians to rediscover Jesus' Jewishness was the shock of the Shoah. This provoked Western Christians of good-will to question and often to dispense with traditional anti-Jewish theologies and to cultivate positive views of Jews and Judaism.

A foundation of such scholarly shifts is the growth of new, far more favorable views of Jewish traditions. These fit with an emerging Christian commitment to avoiding hostility to Jews and Judaism. Importantly, it is clear that new views of Judaism parallel (if not abet) changing views of Jesus. When Judaism is no longer deprecated as a stale religion of arid works-righteousness, it is more acceptable to situate Jesus within rather than opposed to or estranged from his Jewish milieu.

[1] The Nicene Creed, for example, emphasizes his incarnation in the most generic of terms: Jesus "was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became human / man."
[2] Geza Vermes, "Jewish Studies and New Testament Interpretation," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (1980): 1-17, 1.
[3] Ibid., 6.

In light of centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, the implications of new, more accurate views of Jesus and of Judaism are profound both historically and theologically. While there remain disputes of interpretation and even resistance to certain claims, some basic facts are nearly universally accepted (e.g., Jesus observed the Torah and worshipped like other Jews). Now, in contemporary "Jesus research, there is one aspect which is shared by almost all [scholars]: that is, the recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus."[4]

The Challenges of Jesus's Jewishness for Christian Theology

The implications of Jesus's Jewishness for contemporary Christians are complex. In Christian theology, the Jesus of Christian faith is the Son of God, both human and divine, a first century Jew who was resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven. The Jesus of history and Christ of faith are ultimately unified in this one person. Against Docetism, mainstream Christians insisted that both aspects of his identity have a singular and essential role in salvation history.

The Christian trajectory after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE veered sharply away from positive views of central aspects of Jewish religious identity, such as Torah-observance. An originally all-Jewish movement quickly attracted large numbers of Gentiles who, for both practical and theological reasons, rejected the binding authority of the biblical commandments.[5] That as a Jew Jesus valued these is thus a difficult, even confusing realization. Only now, millennia later, do we see the start of an unprecedented effort to grapple with this separation between Jesus the Jew and the Gentile church, for, in Barbara Meyers' helpful summary, "The Jewish Jesus does not enact closeness for non-Jewish Christians and is not expected to provide immediate spiritual or social empowerment. On the contrary the Jewishness of Jesus entails challenges and even unforeseeable difficulties for the believing non-Jewish Christian."[6] The acceptance of Jesus's Jewishness raises theological questions for Christians around the world about the implications for a Jesus who is not so different from them but so similar to his contemporary Jews. In short, "How could a Jewish apocalyptic prophet be of use to [Christian] theology today?"[7]

Research that situates Jesus in his historical and religious milieus has often yielded portrayals of Jesus that resemble those of his Jewish contemporaries. He is

---

[4] Kathy Ehrensperger, "Current Trends in Historical Jesus Research," in *Verdict on Jesus: A New Statement of Evidence*, ed. Leslie Badham and Paul Badham (London: SPCK, 2010), 239-58, 250. Adele Reinhartz, "Beyond the Jewish Jesus Debate," in *The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus*, ed. James G. Crossley and Chris Keith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 70-84, 70-73. In his magisterial survey of Jesus' view of the law, Meier wrote his now well-known aphorism: "The historical Jesus is indeed the halachic Jesus," in John P. Meier, *Law and Love*, vol. 4, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 574-75.

[5] See Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* 10-11, from the mid-second century.

[6] Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 73-74; see also 98.

[7] N. T. Wright, "Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 796-802, 798.

alternately a holy man, miracle worker, itinerant preacher, opponent of Rome, rabbi, messiah, and more. His activities include such things as healing, preaching, arguing about interpretation of the Torah, hosting meals, traveling around the land of Israel, and other activities also undertaken by some of his contemporaries. None of this is surprising; on the contrary, this portrait of Jesus is entirely predictable given our understanding of his context.[8]

This, however, leads to the major challenge I want to focus on: how do Christians affirm Jesus's unique identity in light of his Jewishness? On the one hand, uniqueness and singularity are central to claims about the Christ of Faith, the one called God's "*only* Son" (John 3:16). Presumably not just any first century Jew (or human from any time or place) could have played the role of Christianity's resurrected messiah and savior of humanity. That cosmic role was his alone. On the other hand, Jesus was a Jew of his time and place, distinctive but not unique, with teachings and actions that resembled those of other Jews. Yet, "if Jesus was a Jew like other early first-century Galilean Jews, in what ways can he be said to be unique, a claim that seems fundamental to the gospels' Christology?"[9] This raises a potentially serious tension for Christians between these two dimensions of Jesus' identity.

Furthermore, while earlier some Christians accepted that Jesus was a Jew, they typically defined his Jewishness by contrasting him with his co-religionists. They labeled them, among other things, legalistic, immoral, and murderous, usually in order to make Jesus look superior.[10] Today's Christians face the challenge of affirming Jesus' Jewishness without also casting Judaism as a negative foil. These Christians believe that claims about the Jewish Jesus' significance and even uniqueness ought not depend on an unfavorable (and likely incorrect) contrast with contemporary Jews and Judaism.

Starting Point: Ernst Käsemann

Before considering some Christian writings of the past few decades that wrestle with what it means that Jesus was a Jew, it is useful to consider the work of the twentieth-century German Lutheran theologian, Ernst Käsemann. He wrote a path-breaking essay in 1953, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus."[11] This essay

[8] This has led Sanders, among others, to deny any claims regarding Jesus' uniqueness in any substantive sense: "What about the teaching of Jesus was unique? The historian…will answer, This [teaching] is roughly paralleled here and there, this fairly distinctive, this otherwise unattested: very little is unique, actually." See E. P. Sanders, "The Question of Uniqueness in the Teaching of Jesus," in *The Ethel M. Wood Lecture* (London: University of London, 1990), 26.

[9] Reinhartz, "Beyond," 74.

[10] The roots of such contrasts between Jesus and his sinful Jewish contemporaries go back of course to the New Testament itself. Later Christians drew upon and often sharpened the original distinctions; see ibid., 74-79.

[11] Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on the New Testament*, ed. Ernst Käsemann (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1964), 188-214. The lecture the essay is based on was given in 1953.

straddles a transition from scholarly disinterest in Jesus' Jewishness and contemporary Judaism to the current priority the subject receives in academic and non-academic settings alike.[12]

Käsemann's essay marks the emergence of a new openness to study of the historical Jesus that would ostensibly be quite attentive to his Jewish milieu. Käsemann famously rejects doubts about whether there was any retrievable historical data in the gospels, a position closely associated with his teacher Rudolf Bultmann. Rather, he discusses various criteria one might use to assess the historicity of the gospel accounts. Most noteworthy is his use of the so-called criterion of dissimilarity. He claims that sayings are likely authentic, meaning they come from Jesus himself, if "there are no grounds…for deriving a [similar] tradition from Judaism" of his day.[13] Without any such precedent or parallel, one can then reasonably assume that the saying is genuinely novel and therefore probably said by Jesus himself.

I am not here interested in the reliability or persuasiveness of Käsemann's criteria. Rather, I am interested in his method, that is, how he situates Jesus in his Jewish milieu, especially when making comparative judgments about the nature of Jesus's Jewishness vis-à-vis his co-religionists. Käsemann is careful not to take dissimilarity to extremes; he also relies upon significant similarities and necessarily refers often to contemporaneous Jewish life. Foundational to his portrayal of Jesus is the claim that Jesus resembles "every pious Jew" and that "certainly he was a Jew and made the assumptions of Jewish piety."[14] Jesus occupies a familiar role of teacher of Torah on topics such as the sabbath and purity. When looking at specific gospel scenes, Käsemann refers to contemporary Jewish actions and beliefs to put Jesus in historical context and to explicate what Jesus is doing. Contemporary Jews thus provide a sort of baseline or standard against which to compare and contrast Jesus (most often with those Käsemann calls generically and anachronistically "the rabbis"). This helps him to identify "the *distinctive* element in the mission of Jesus."[15] For his purpose, it is contrasts that matter, not comparisons or areas of overlap between Jesus and contemporary Jews. Parallels and precedents are useful, but even more significantly he wants not only to find ways to demonstrate that Jesus is different from his Jewish contemporaries but is actually superior.

For example, Jesus's interpretations of the Torah in the so-called "antitheses" (Matt 5:21-48) are like those a "rabbi interpreting the sense of the Scripture might have done." However, the comparison then becomes a contrast, as he insists that "there are no Jewish parallels, *nor indeed can there be*," to what Jesus teaches.[16] The generic rabbi lacks the authority that Jesus possesses, because the rabbi

[12] While there have been many publications about Jesus' Jewishness over the last few decades, E. P. Sanders' work stands out as especially significant for attention to this question. See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).
[13] Käsemann, "Problem," 37. He also makes a related claim about the likely authenticity of Jesus's sayings that cannot be "ascrib[ed] to primitive Christianity."
[14] Ibid., 38, 40.
[15] Ibid., 37. Emphasis added.
[16] Ibid. Emphasis added.

grounds all he says in Scripture whereas Jesus speaks with a unique level of authority.[17] Likewise, Käsemann notes that both Jesus and rabbis employ parables as common teaching devices that are conventional forms of explicating Scripture. However, here too Käsemann deprecates Jewish teaching by then making a sharp contrast between Jesus's parables and rabbinic parables. Jesus's parables are praised for having a "clarity and self-containedness…which stand out sharply from the rabbinic parallels."[18] Jesus's parables thus reveal how Jesus is both like and more importantly unlike (better: transcends) his contemporaries. He surpasses the paradigmatic rabbi because in his parables Jesus shows that he "lives by the immediacy of contemplation…while the [rabbis'] existence is determined by meditation." This murky contrast implies that Jesus's Jewish contemporaries are not focused on the needs of the present since they are too tightly bound to Scripture and lack dynamic authority in the community. Käsemann argues that Jesus suffers from none of these limitations or defects, which ensure the "distinctive nature of his mission."

Repeatedly, contemporary Jewish practice serves as a negative foil to Jesus's practice, in profound and hostile ways. Jesus's ethics were superior to his contemporaries because his "demand for intelligent love is set up and placed in opposition to the demand of the rabbinate [sic] for blind obedience."[19] Jesus's preaching was unequalled, not just because of what he taught but because of his unique role in salvation history: "No prophet could be credited with the eschatological significance which Jesus obviously ascribed to his own actions." This is apparent by his "remov[ing] himself from the jurisdiction of Moses," something no prior prophet would have done.[20] Käsemann even breaks with the idea that Jesus saw himself as the messiah in order to make an anti-Jewish contrast about his superiority and uniqueness. In contrast to other Jewish figures acclaimed as messiah, Jesus did "what needed doing in the present."[21] He eschewed the title, with its focus on the future. Instead, he focused on encouraging people to do good works now, in contrast to other first century messianic candidates who Käsemann says were indifferent to current needs. (Only later did "his community" make the claim that Jesus was the messiah). Käsemann includes additional claims regarding Jesus's

[17] Käsemann's claim rests on Jesus's use of the phrase "But I say" at the start of each section. See the critique of this approach in Sanders, "Question," 23.
[18] Käsemann, "Problem," 41-44.
[19] Ibid., 42.
[20] Jesus here occupies the familiar role of teacher of Torah (on topics such as the sabbath and purity), usually in disputes with other Jews, which situates him within a common first century discourse about how to interpret the Torah. However, Käsemann also argues that Jesus's statements "strik[e] at the presuppositions of the whole classical conception" of Torah observance. In those cases, Jesus is supposedly indifferent to the requirements of the Torah and willing to ignore them. This portrayal is confusing and inconsistent (no other pious Jews claimed to follow Torah only sometimes) because Käsemann does not clarify what binding authority the laws of the Torah have for Jesus. Rather, he says Jesus was sometimes faithful to the Torah and explained how to observe it but sometimes he intended to "override…the words of the Torah." Käsemann does not clarify what criteria his Jesus uses to explain this contradiction. See ibid., 39-40.
[21] Ibid., 44.

unique closeness to God and his unique authority over the law, always in contrast to contemporary Jews.[22]

Käsemann's embrace of Jesus's Jewishness is an important step in historical Jesus study. However, Käsemann uses his research to assert anti-Jewish contrasts and ultimately to demonstrate the obsolescence of Judaism. Rather than assess Judaism out of its own sources and establish unbiased, clear standards for comparison, he sets Jesus against his Jewish religious tradition. Jesus's authority is so powerful that he "shakes the very foundations of Judaism."[23] Identifying how Jesus is distinctive, perhaps useful for an inquiry into the historical Jesus, is for Käsemann really a search for how Jesus is better than and ultimately transcends Judaism. Contemporary Judaism functions not as a context but as a contrast to a theological claim about Jesus's unique status.[24]

The example of Käsemann is important because it marks a major moment along a trajectory of historical Jesus scholarship. His insistence on affirming Jesus's Jewishness, while not original to him, was programmatic for future inquiry. Likewise, his effort to simultaneously situate Jesus within and above Judaism illustrates not just traditional anti-Judaism but what Käsemann apparently takes to be a theological necessity: Jesus cannot appear too much like other Jews if he is to also be distinctive and unique.

Contemporary Christian Views of Jesus's Uniqueness as a Jew

Before considering specific contemporary sources, it is first necessary to analyze a near-universal claim in historical Jesus research. Given the acceptance of Jesus's Jewishness, one might find many parallels or areas of overlap with his contemporaries' views or practices. However, in the most profound theological sense, the majority of Christian writers tend to stress that Jesus was unique. Sanders writes about this trend: "Uniqueness is frequently attributed [by Christian scholars of the historical Jesus] to all the major aspects of Jesus's career, or, more precisely, to aspects of all the major aspects. Jesus taught, he healed and he drew followers, and in all these cases someone will say that some points are unique."[25] Uniqueness is seldom rigorously defined. Most often it is an inductive assessment whereby scholars assemble passages from various genres in the gospels that together can be used to produce a portrait of Jesus as similar but more importantly fundamentally different from contemporary Jews.

The claim regarding Jesus's uniqueness has long been essential to Christian portrayals of him. The reasons for this are theological, not historical, even if the

---

[22] Ibid., 39-42.
[23] Ibid., 40.
[24] Sanders writes, "As a theologian, Käsemann wished to tie a substantive question of Christianity—whether Jesus was 'Messiah'—directly to what he (Käsemann) regarded as unique," in Sanders, "Question," 11. Ehrensperger summarizes his claims: while "Jesus's Jewishness was recognized" by Käsemann, he argued that "Jesus had decisively moved beyond the boundaries of Judaism to the extent that he had overcome Judaism," in Ehrensperger, "Current Trends," 251.
[25] Sanders, "Question," 5.

argument appears to be based on historical study. However, what is at stake in a seemingly historical endeavor to establish Jesus's uniqueness is actually not a historical claim but a religious one. S. W. Sykes illustrates this starkly: "Does the [scholarly] account distinguish Christ from the rest of humanity? Any account which does not distinguish him from the rest of humanity is not credible as Christology."[26] This is an entirely correct assessment for most historical Jesus scholarship. The assumption is of a consonance between historical results and theological claims. *If the risen Christ is unique—and every New Testament text and Christian theologian makes this point in different ways—it is only reasonable to expect the human Jesus the Jew was as well.* To prove this, scholars "transfer the…theological affirmation of [Jesus's] absolute uniqueness to an historical statement that, standing alone, could never assert more than relative uniqueness, that is to say, a quite ordinary postulation of difference."[27]

A simple and straightforward way of establishing Jesus's uniqueness is by *contrasting* him with contemporaneous Jews and Judaism. Specifically, with the emergence of interest in the historical Jesus, there emerged the so-called "uniqueness idea, [that is] the conviction that Jesus's relationship to Judaism is always to be seen in terms of a sharp contrast."[28] This seemingly-historical claim furnishes support for a theological claim. The latter thus shapes the former, resulting in an unflattering or critical presentation of the Jews of Jesus's time. To make him more theologically significant for Christians, to "make him stand out as superior, people all too often caricature and misrepresent Judaism."[29] Historical accuracy is subordinated to this other goal.

Importantly, the texts I will turn to next share two key assumptions. First, like other portraits of the historical Jesus they accept that he was a Jew. They break with centuries of Christian history when Jesus's Jewishness was, if not denied, downplayed or solely used to emphasize the truth of Jesus's message and his theological significance. The implications of this are complex, given the diversity of first century Judaism, but Jesus's milieu was unquestionably socially, culturally, and religiously Jewish. Any analysis of the gospels must affirm this.[30]

---

[26] S. W. Sykes, "The Theology of the Humanity of Christ," in *Christ, Faith and History*, ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 53-72, 66.

[27] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39. Smith's offers a broad and pointed critique of claims to uniqueness in this book. James Crossley undermines efforts to establish Jesus' uniqueness by arguing that maybe many other first century Jews "were slightly more complex individuals—maybe 'unique-ish' themselves," and they deserve to be seen in their uniqueness too. See James G. Crossley, "A 'Very Jewish' Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013): 109-29, 121.

[28] Lloyd Gaston, "The Uniqueness of Jesus as a Methodological Problem," in *Origins and Methods: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity*, ed. B. H. McLean (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 271–81, 273.

[29] Sanders, "Question," 24. See also Gaston, "Uniqueness," 275.

[30] For a persuasive discussion of the challenges of identifying which (forms of) Judaism one might compare Jesus to, see Tom Holmen, "Covenant Thinking: Accounting for Diversity in Early Judaism," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 95-113.

Second, the authors of our selected texts agree that it is no longer acceptable for Christians on moral or exegetical grounds to deprecate first century Judaism. The standard scholarly expectation is an unbiased reading of the relevant sources from the period rather than a skewed reading that contrasts supposedly negative features of ancient Judaism with positive features of Jesus's teaching.[31] (Note Krister Stendahl's rule: Do not compare the best in your religion with the worst in another.[32]) This latter reading is not only bad scholarship but severs Jesus from his co-religionists and their social and religious worlds. It introduces a divide between Jesus and Judaism that did not exist. On the contrary, an accurate portrait of first century Judaism is both fair to Judaism and improves understanding of the historical Jesus.

These two assumptions stand in some tension with each other. If the historical Jesus was a Jew, and the historical Jesus should not be presented as remedying, or standing apart from, or superseding, some purported fault(s) in Judaism or among contemporaneous Jews, then how is Jesus the Jew distinctive or unique? This is the corollary of belief in the uniqueness of the Christ of faith. Dagmar Winter identifies this "theological dilemma for Christians…how to understand and positively appreciate Jesus in his distinctiveness without being negative about Judaism."[33] Jesus was one of many first century Jews, living amidst other Jews with valid ways of living Jewishly. Were his views and practices so different that they bear the theological weight of linking the Jesus of history with the raised Christ or the Christ of faith, the superhuman savior professed in the Christian kerygma and at the center of all Christian theology? Establishing his uniqueness alongside his Jewishness remains a goal for all of these authors, as it was in the earlier portraits discussed above, but they say they seek to do so without deprecating Jews or Judaism. This is an admirable but difficult task, and, as will be seen below, success is elusive. In my analysis, I will show how these authors try to incorporate a Christian theological viewpoint along with an avowed affirmation of Jesus's Jewishness and awareness of anti-Judaism. They will affirm a commitment to historical study but refuse to consider the radical viewpoint that Jesus did not fundamentally stand apart from his Jewish world in word or deed.

I next want to turn to contemporary Christian views of Jesus's Jewishness. I will look at three sources: two major monographs (one by a prominent and influential Catholic theologian, Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, and one co-written by two leading Protestant Bible scholars, Richard Hays and Christopher Hays) plus a collection of statements from the Catholic Church. I have selected these particular sources to illustrate a range of possible views in two key genres: the theological monograph and official church statements. When I write about Christians' views generically, I have in mind both these categories of sources.

---

[31] For a review of this trend in its diverse manifestations over time see Dagmar Winter, "The Dissimilar Jesus: Anti-Semitism, Protestantism, Hero-Worship, and Dialectical Theology," in *Soundings in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and Methods in Jewish and Christian Scholarship*, ed. Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 129-42.

[32] Quoted in Tzvi Novick, *Judaism: A Guide for Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025).

[33] Winter, "Dissimilar Jesus," 129.

Pope Benedict XVI (Catholic)

In his 2007 book *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) offers a detailed theological assessment of and reflections on the early stages of Jesus's public mission.[34] He engages with scholarly views and presents his own interpretations of Jesus's life and actions. In particular, Benedict offers consistently favorable presentations of Judaism. Elsewhere, he said he writes in the shadow of the Shoah and frankly admits that earlier Christian views of Judaism were "conceived in a polemical context…and have repeatedly led to anti-Semitic failures."[35] He insists on the need for the church to break with anti-Jewish polemic and to affirm the ongoing legitimacy of (rabbinic) Judaism. Against a long tradition of anti-Judaism, he takes great care to express a positive valuation of Judaism despite the failure of most Jews to view Jesus as the expected Messiah of Israel.[36] Judaism, for him, is not an error or a rejection of the truth but one of "two responses in history [alongside Christianity] to the destruction of the [Jerusalem] temple." In a remarkable break with Christian contempt for Jewish fidelity to the commandments, he encourages Christians to see Jews as models of what proper observance of the law looks like. By "look[ing] respectfully at this obedience of Israel, [Christians] can appreciate better the great commandments."[37]

In particular, he speaks warmly of many features of Judaism at the time of Jesus, such as prayer.[38] He rejects claims that ideas such as chosenness and Jewish ritual practices needed to be done away with.[39] Especially significant is his critique of traditional accusations that (ancient) Judaism was moribund and arid, lacking a spiritual component, and bogged down in legalism. His language is surprisingly strong. Do not think Jesus offered a "freedom-loving and rational man's critique of an ossified legalism—hypocritical to the core and guilty of dragging religion down."[40] He presents the Jewish covenant founded on law as spiritually and religiously vibrant. He is concerned for accuracy and fairness, and he rejects traditionally negative contrasts between Jesus and contemporary Jews because they "did not favor a particularly friendly image of Judaism." Likewise, he rejects attempts to deprecate Jewish belief and practice by those claiming that Jesus came to fix all that was wrong with them. It is false to say that Jesus came to make religious life a "less burdensome life than 'Jewish legalism.'"[41] It is also false to say Jesus

[34] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
[35] Benedict XVI, "Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise De Iudaeis," *Communio* 45 (2018): 163-84, 166. He has spoken of the influence of the Shoah on Catholic views of Judaism earlier; see his introduction to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," (2001).
[36] Benedict XVI, "Grace," 163.
[37] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus*, 122.
[38] Ibid., 57.
[39] Ibid., 51.
[40] Ibid., 106.
[41] Ibid., 109.

mounted "a double revolution against the Judaism of Jesus's time" (against ideas of chosenness and ritual practices).[42] Finally, against those who seek to distance Jesus's message from Judaism (to find elements of gnosticism in it, for example), he insists on Jesus's deep rootedness in the "soil of the Old Testament and of Judaism."[43] Jesus was a faithful Jew and neither estranged from nor opposed to the Judaism of his contemporaries.

Benedict's approach to Judaism draws on trends in Catholic biblical hermeneutics. He endorses the use of the historical-critical method and recognizes that the gospels often reveal the interests of the individual authors in the late first century.[44] This approach is essential for understanding the narratives about Jesus correctly. It is, however, inherently limited. To one who also believes that "as man, [Jesus] truly was God," historical data alone are too limiting.[45] There needs to be a "conviction of faith as [a] starting point" for any Christian study of Jesus. Rather than rely solely on the results of historical exegesis, the gospels are received by a community of believers, the church. Its members are necessarily to be open to theological readings of the text based on the assumption that God speaks through it, up through the present, and gives them access to "the face of the Lord" (quoting Ps 27:8). A historical inquiry alone is unable to yield a true sense of Jesus's uniqueness. For this too one needs to be motivated by faith. The remarkable Christological claims make sense only if one is convinced that "Jesus really did explode all existing categories and could only be understood in light of the mystery of God."[46]

I highlight this dual approach—historical-critical and theological—in the context of Benedict's statements on Judaism in order to introduce the methodological orientation of his project. Historical study only gets one so far, he admits. He ultimately seeks a "properly theological interpretation of the Bible."[47] Importantly, he minimizes any tension between these approaches. Benedict is confident that working together they enrich an understanding of Christ.

However, an examination of some of his discussions of Jesus's Jewishness and his first century Jewish milieu show that these two approaches raise serious tensions. On the one hand, he is sincerely committed to an historical, non-polemical portrait of Judaism, which, he notes, undermines superficial attempts to make Judaism serve as a negative contrast to Jesus. Such caricatures have done great harm and misrepresent the historical sources. On the other hand, he is ultimately unsatisfied with a portrait of Jesus as just another Jew. Having, he said, situated him within his Jewish milieu and, unlike in past Christian writings, eschewed hostile contrasts with Judaism, he nevertheless seeks to demonstrate Jesus's uniqueness and superiority. Jesus within Judaism alone is not theologically satisfying; Benedict wants to demonstrate, within the limits he established, that which makes Jesus

[42] Ibid., 51.
[43] Ibid., 235; see also 346.
[44] Ibid., xvi. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (April 23, 1993), I.A.1. The influence of this statement is apparent throughout his work.
[45] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus*, xxiii.
[46] See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Interpretation," II.B.1.
[47] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus*, xxiii.

different from his fellow Jews and even unique. Is it possible for Christian theologies to exalt Jesus without such contrasts?

The example of the Pharisees is instructive. Benedict speaks positively about Jewish law observance, and he highlights the Pharisees' faithfulness to Torah, resistance to assimilation to pagan norms, and development of the form of Judaism destined to survive after 70 CE as found "in the Mishnah and Talmud."[48] In a discussion of the Kingdom of God, Benedict turns to Jesus's parable on the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14), both of whom come to pray at the Temple.[49] The Lukan Jesus presents the two as opposite types. The Pharisee is pious but boastful, and the tax collector is humble and a sinner. Only the latter is praised and deemed righteous before God, while the former is reduced to a low status.

My interest is not in the parable itself but in Benedict's surprising interpretation of it. He says the tax collector's humility illustrates a principle that is central to Jesus's message: one should draw closer to God and establish a relationship with God. Such intimacy is the meaning of the Kingdom of God. By contrast, the Pharisee exemplifies exactly the opposite. "The Pharisee does not really look at God at all, but only at himself; he does not really need God, because he does everything right by himself. He has no real relation to God."[50] Benedict has moved from a passage about a Pharisee's boasting in a prayer to God about his good deeds to a claim about his profound estrangement from God not found in the original Lukan text. What is significant is Benedict's stated purpose: he seeks to develop his idea of Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom of God that is about intimacy with and reliance on God. For this the Pharisee functions as a negative foil far beyond what the original text says in order to buttress Benedict's conception of what the Kingdom of God is and is not. He takes the polemical framing in Luke at face value, ignoring the widespread scholarly recognition—which he otherwise shares—that Pharisees are often deployed as paradigmatic opponents of Jesus, though many were in fact quite close to and similar to Jesus.[51] If Jesus's message is that humility is required for a person, and implicitly all humans, to enter into "being-in-relationship" with God, the Pharisee represents indifference (or worse) to God and deluded self-sufficiency.[52] Benedict's admirable commitment to a positive presentation of Judaism and to a historically-informed understanding of the gospels crumbles when he seeks to identify here "the distinguishing feature of [Jesus's] message." His desire to elucidate that which is "new" (in this case, in Jesus's view of the Kingdom of God) leads him to deprecate Pharisaic / Rabbinic Judaism despite having pledged not to.

---

[48] Ibid., 13; see also 103.
[49] Ibid., 61.
[50] Ibid., 62.
[51] "It may also be stressed that, if Jesus shows himself severe towards the Pharisees, it is because he is closer to them than to other contemporary Jewish groups," in the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church," (1985), §III:17.
[52] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus*, 60-62.

Relatedly, Benedict's treatment of the theme of the universality of Jesus's message relies on a similar set of contrasts with contemporaneous Judaism. His central claim is about a message for all humanity "anchored in communion of will with Jesus and so with God himself."[53] This message was intended to reach all people, though it has its roots in the people of Israel and the Torah. Jews, he posits, failed and fail to understand God's original intention to call a "new family…above the bonds of descent according to the flesh."[54] This is no late innovation but a feature of the law from the start, now realized solely through "communion with Jesus." He repeatedly emphasizes its newness, its transcending the bounds of Israel. Jesus developed it through a "new interpretation" of the Torah in order to create a "new universal family" and a "new communion."[55]

Most relevant is Benedict's presentation of Jesus's view of the law and the covenant in opposition to the views of other Jews. He repeatedly deploys negative imagery of Jewish views. Jesus, he says, had a "new perspective" that offered a "new, free obedience" to the commandments. This overcomes a "literal application of Israel's social order" that hinders the creation of a universal community of believers.[56] Jesus broke with the "literal historical form" which bound only one people (Israel) to God in favor of a "new perspective" that creates this inclusive community of believers. He even deploys the starkly negative imagery of Galatians, especially Paul's attack on Jewish believers in Christ who insisted on Gentile observance of the law. Benedict characterizes Paul's indictment of his opponents' faults as their clinging to a "blind and arbitrary" theology and "underst[anding the law] according to the flesh." Benedict applies this accusation to Jewish interpretation in general. This is a harsh polemic, with criticisms of Israel's supposed particularism and failure to correctly understand God's ultimate intention expressed in Scripture.

Again, Benedict's purpose shapes his interpretation. In order to ground a vision of a universal church in the Hebrew Bible and the traditions of Israel, he argues that the idea was already present there but that Israel failed to recognize it or fulfill it. He could have said this was simply an unprecedented and unexpected development, but this risked decoupling Jesus's message from Scripture. Instead, he insists the requirement that Israel be a "light to the nations" (quoting Isa 42:7) and bring "all the nations now [to] pray to [the God of Israel]" was an integral part of the original covenant.[57] Jesus's newness is thus only partial but profoundly significant, for Benedict believes that Jesus achieved what Israel did not. Benedict's argument is thus complex, balancing what is new and what was promised long ago (i.e. continuity and discontinuity), but his approach is straightforward: Jesus's Jewish contemporaries serve as a foil to Jesus, and he issues not a neutral but a critical

[53] Ibid., 119.
[54] Ibid., 117.
[55] Ibid., 120.
[56] Ibid., 117-19.
[57] Ibid., 116.

assessment of them. This is precisely the type of contrast and deprecation he warns about elsewhere.

Richard Hays and Christopher Hays (Protestant)

The recent co-authored book by Richard Hays and Christopher Hays *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (2024) has received a great amount of scholarly and popular attention, especially because it presents an unexpected shift in Richard Hays' views. While he formerly argued that the Bible presented homosexuality as sinful and rejected interpretations that seemed to downplay this critical stance, in this book he has changed his position.[58] Writing with his son Christopher, these two Protestant Bible scholars see in the Bible support for the "full inclusion of believers with differing sexual orientations."[59] They cast this shift in terms of underlying values, calling theirs a new perspective that breaks with perspectives like those of Jesus's Pharisaic opponents, who focused on "straining of gnats," and consider instead the "weightier matters of the law" (quoting Mt 23:23-24).[60] This type of contrast, between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, is a consistent motif throughout the book as they seek to show how his contemporaries exemplify a legalistic and close-minded view of Jewish law opposed to Jesus's distinctly gracious and open-minded view.

They explicitly lay out their guiding principle toward the start of their book: "our goal is to demonstrate that the biblical story, taken as a whole, depicts the ever-widening path of God's mercy."[61] Mercy is their (and, they argue, God's and Jesus's) overriding value. While the term "mercy" in general can be (and often is) used in a generic sense for kindness or compassion, they have a narrower conception. It is "the extension of God's love to new things."[62] This emphasis on newness (especially for Jesus's teachings) gives it social, moral, and religious qualities, referring most often to biblical preferences for where boundaries between insiders and outsiders should be set and how they can be changed. In their usage, it is a fluid and easily adaptable concept, shaping proper attitudes toward different groups of people or topics.

Almost always, *the boundaries being "extended" or overridden by the Hayses are those defining the people of Israel, and the laws being "extended" or abrogated*

---

[58] Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 7-10. Besides scholarly reviews, in popular media the book has received much attention; e.g., https://www.npr.org/2024/09/15/nx-s1-4922708/his-work-was-used-to-exclude-lgbtq-people-from-church-he-argues-the-opposite; https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/24/opinion/gay-marriage-religion-theology-us.html; https://www.christiancentury.org/books/unsettling-surprise-god-s-mercy. Yale University Press is a prestigious, leading press in religious studies. The book has won at least one award: 2025 Prose Award winner, Theology and Religious Studies category, sponsored by the Association of American Publishers.

[59] Ibid., 214.

[60] Ibid., 223.

[61] Ibid., 22.

[62] Ibid., 36.

are the biblical commandments Jews are expected to follow. This is consistently expressed as a sharp contrast. On the one hand are those they denounce: law-observant, traditionally-minded Jews who supposedly see questions about God's mercy and openness to outsiders as "threats to the community, to its faith, and even to God Himself." On the other hand, they praise those who seek to include outsiders "asking for God's mercy and asking to be accepted" (59).[63]

Before explicating more fully the contrast at the heart of their book, it is necessary to first note a profound tension. The Hayses' portrayals of Israelites / Jews as such, from the Hebrew Bible to the time of Jesus, are typically positive. In a chapter on the Sabbath, for example, they characterize Jews as "earnestly devout people concerned to maintain a high view of scriptural holiness and scriptural authority."[64] They are "conscientious" and "logically and theologically consistent." Their motives are noble, as they "sought to safeguard the sanctity of the Sabbath." The Hayses praise them for their "practical, even noble" application of biblical law, their "well-meaning attempt to honor God's law," and their devotion to their fellow Jews.[65] They also admire rabbinic Judaism because of the sages' sophisticated methods of interpreting Scripture and the Talmud because it engages with issues that remain compelling.

I emphasize this positive portrayal because a dramatic change consistently takes place as the Christian tension between Jesus as a Jew vs. his fundamental differences from Judaism plays out in the book. When discussing Israelites / Jews not as such but in contrast to others (typically the prophets, Jesus, Paul, etc.), the Hayses harshly denounce them as stubborn, ignorant of their own scriptures, and hateful toward outsiders. To defend their conception of mercy they cast them as the negative foil to the divine blessings, merciful treatment, and openness to outsiders that God and Jesus truly desire.

The Hayses gather passages from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that, they say, evince Jesus' attitude toward the inclusion of outsiders. Concomitantly, on this issue they also criticize Israelites / Jews for their "hardness of heart and blindness" to this divine initiative.[66] For example, in a lengthy discussion of Isaiah's views of eunuchs and foreigners, they characteristically propose that there were two opposed positions. Against Isaiah's welcome of eunuchs (into the Temple? [56:4-5]), they say other Jews broadly "excluded [them] from the circle of blessings that was supposed to be [for] God's people."[67] They assume the worst about them, speculating that other Israelites "were probably reticent to speak of [eunuchs]" or that "not everyone was on board with" an inclusive attitude.[68] Yet apart from their citation of a single critical verse in another book (Dt 23:1), they

[63] That they occasionally portray Jesus as similar to other first century Jews (e.g., 107, 111, 116-17, 131, 148) does not detract from my overall argument regarding their frequent use of contrasts between Jesus and other Jews.
[64] Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 122-25.
[65] Ibid., 52-59, 130-32.
[66] Ibid., 130.
[67] Ibid., 97-98.
[68] Ibid., 98-101.

offer no evidence about what Isaiah's contemporaries thought of his views or how these outsiders were treated. Their polemic far outruns any evidence, as when they say some Israelites were so hostile to eunuchs that they would not even "acknowledge their existence." The Hayses invert whatever positive claims the biblical 'hero' makes (in this case, Isaiah) in order to underscore his novelty and mercy by attributing the opposite, often hateful views to other Israelites.

Foreigners, they say, fared no better, facing inveterate and widespread antipathy from Israelites. The Hayses set up a straw man who stands for all they oppose, again without evidence that any held such views, in order to elevate Jesus' views. In biting, modern language, they call Jews who they imagine resisted the widening of God's mercy in Amos "nationalistic zealots" (Amos 9:1-10).[69] His claims "would have been very frustrating," they speculate. However, they do not show that Amos actually angered anyone, let alone those they say had a "stake in the superiority of their own nation." Ironically, we have clear evidence against this claim of widespread bellicose Israelite nationalism in the inclusion of Amos' prophecy in the Bible.

Claims of a hostile Israelite attitude, far different than that of Jesus, appear often. Those who refused to let foreigners share the Passover and restricted their entry into the Temple did not just maintain communal boundaries; they "demonized foreigners."[70] Passages having nothing to do with attitudes toward foreigners are said to demonstrate Israelites' antipathy. For example, building on the hint that some Gentiles left Egypt with the fleeing Israelites (Exod 12:38), they rebuke later Jews for betraying their values and disdaining outsiders. Using language anachronistically taken from American political discourse, they call them "anti-immigrant and racist." Just as some close-minded Americans betray a noble heritage of openness toward outsiders, there was a broad trend among most of those in ancient Israel when "anti-foreigner views thrived" that likewise betrayed their own tradition. Finally, Ezra's demand to the returnees from exile to divorce foreign wives—clearly a shocking and widely-resented demand—is cast not as a singular and unprecedented event but as typical in Israel (on 9:1-10:17). Rather than see it as unique, they say the opposite: it reflects "a long tradition of suspicion toward foreigners and a culture of ongoing, aggressive xenophobia."[71]

Narratives about Jesus follow the same pattern as narratives about the prophets and are used to show not just his 'inherent' greatness but his superiority to contemporary Jews. Jesus speaks to Gentiles and to Jews on the margins of society in order to expand "the grace of Israel's God to encompass foreign nations and to embrace outcasts."[72] Jews, by contrast, disapprove of Jesus's engaging with outsiders and are not just scandalized or surprised; they are motivated by a hateful view of those—both Jews and Gentiles—not just like themselves, that is, "everyone who failed to obey the law scrupulously." This prejudice, they say, is illustrated in numerous scenes, such as the scene in the Gospel of John narrating Jesus's meeting

[69] Ibid., 78.
[70] Ibid., 101-02.
[71] From Ezra's demand, we see, ironically, that many Israelites were quite welcoming of outsiders.
[72] Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 132.

with the Samaritan woman, which notes that it is unusual for a Jew to talk with a Samaritan (4:9) and a woman (4:27). However, nothing programmatic follows this scene in John about outsiders or women, nor does he face any opposition to these acts. The Hayses, however, situate this account in terms of a far-reaching dualism between Jesus's views and other Jews' views. Jesus is initiating a "revolutionary…new community" based on mercy. Contemporary Jews, on the other hand, seek to maintain "the barrier between Jews and Samaritans" and "the barrier erected to restrict conversation between men and women."[73] They are a useful foil to Jesus's bold initiative, for in the Hayses' account Jews' supposed xenophobia and misogyny—going so far as to try to police speech—give his words and acts greater power.

The Hayses' retelling of the disturbance in the Temple is revealing.[74] In all gospel accounts Jesus's hostility is against the moneychangers (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46; Jn 2:13-17). He faults them for "selling and buying in the temple" (Mt 21:12). There is probably a mixture of opposition to perceived economic injustice and of eschatological symbolism that provokes his attack. For biblical support for his action, all the synoptic gospels quote Isa 56:7 ("My house shall be called a house of prayer") and Jer 7:11 (it has "become a den of robbers") to emphasize what the Temple should be like and what is has become. The Hayses, however, focus on the inclusion of the phrase "for all peoples" at the end of Isa 56:7 in Mark's account alone (11:15)[75]. Because of these few words in Mark, they then assert that Jesus's critique was generally directed at the Temple's exclusionary policies. This phrase, found nowhere else, allows them to shift the focus of his attack from its probable actual reason(s) to one where he clashes with Jews over mercy. However, in no gospel account is there an indication here of "an expansion of the grace of Israel's God to encompass foreign nations and to embrace outcasts." The Hayses offer this interpretation because of a pre-existing interest in extolling Jesus by pitting him against close-minded Jews, for which purpose it is helpful to show that the Temple is fundamentally an exclusivist institution.[76]

Perhaps the starkest contrast the Hayses offer is regarding views of biblical law. In many scenes, they say, Jews do not just read the Bible differently from Jesus. Rather, he alone embraces deeper values they consistently ignore. For example, Jesus's interpretations are intended to end suffering and to ensure "human wholeness and well-being."[77] Other Jews do not care about the suffering of others because of their "blindness to the needs of afflicted people." The Hayses' denunciations of how Jews observe Sabbath law recall pre-modern polemic about legalistic Jews. Jews, they write, adhere to the "strictest prohibition[s]." They are so "scrupulous" that they ignore values such as "compassion [and] mercy." They are so

[73] Ibid., 147.
[74] Ibid., 115-16.
[75] In a note, they say there are "variations of this saying" in the other gospels, though they do not say that this phrase is absent there (236).
[76] Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 97-98, 158. They mischaracterize the Temple, calling it a "private royal sanctuary" in contrast to an open place for a welcoming community gathering.
[77] Ibid., 129-32.

"meticulous" they stand in the way of God's mercy.[78] They are repeatedly accused of being so "strict" in their stubborn adherence to the law regarding "legal purity" and the Sabbath that they show no care for the afflicted. They reject Jesus's teachings and acts because they insist on wrongly observing the law, especially due to their misguided legalism.

Despite being Bible scholars, the Hayses read texts superficially, as if they are reliable accounts of actual events. They are indifferent to the ways the gospel writers have carefully constructed conflict stories and show no awareness that the gospels as we have them reflect the interests of the writers decades after Jesus. In particular, they fail to read the gospels critically and skeptically, especially the portraits of Jesus's unbelieving Jewish opponents, whom the evangelists are likely to be biased against. They indicate briefly that they are aware of long-standing misrepresentations of Pharisees in Christian writings. This, however, has no effect on their own negative stereotyping of Pharisees as uncompassionate,[79] staunchly legalistic,[80] and stubborn,[81] beyond what the text actually says.

They extend such denunciations to later Jews. When Jewish believers insist on Gentile circumcision for entry into the community, the Hayses pejoratively call them the "hardline law-observant faction" (on Acts 15:1, 5).[82] Though the text never says this, they cast them as stubborn opponents of the solution reached at the council. Because they were so "rigorous" about the law, they supposedly broke with others by refusing to see Gentile believers as "fully integrated into the people of Israel."

The Hayses introduce topics missing from the biblical texts in order to unfavorably contrast contemporary Jews with Jesus. These consistently replicate traditional anti-Jewish tropes. For example, in one lengthy pericope they create harsh accusations against Jesus's contemporaries that are not found in Luke (Lk 7:36-50).[83] Jesus, they say, welcomes all and forgives all, even sinners. It is the latter act that in Luke explains why Simon, who hosts the dinner, expresses some befuddlement. On the one hand, when discussing Simon on his own, they present him quite positively. They admit he generously arranged a dinner party and is an "upright citizen." More so than in Luke, however, the Hayses also make Simon into Jesus's foil. Rather than being welcoming like Jesus, he displays "stingy hospitality," as if he is concerned about the cost of the dinner or about who can come. He is like Jews who "pride themselves on careful observance of the law and its purity standards," as if he evinces a misguided devotion to Torah. However, none of these issues are raised in Luke, nor are they even relevant here.

In a parallel distortion, when discussing the Parable of the Good Samaritan they present the questioning lawyer as xenophobic and thus challenged by Jesus's

[78] Ibid., 124-27.
[79] Ibid., 138.
[80] Ibid., 202.
[81] Ibid., 127.
[82] Ibid., 182-84.
[83] Ibid., 136-37.

"mind-expanding" vision for non-Jews.[84] Contrary to what the Hayses write, the lawyer never expresses any hostility toward outsiders nor is Jesus rebutting a close-minded interpretation of Lev 19:18 on love of neighbor. The lawyer says nothing that suggests he endorses "ethnic separation" and Jesus does not convince him to accept an "expansive" view of mercy. This is an artificial clash and an unreliable retelling that introduces foreign ideas about Jesus's interlocutor in order to set him up as a foil to Jesus.

Throughout their book, the Hayses introduce Jews (and earlier, Israelites) in all these scenes *to make Jesus look better by making them look worse.* As noted at the start, Jews and Judaism are not always presented negatively. Only when the Hayses want to say something about Jesus' (or prophets') views do they "flip the script," rendering Jesus's otherwise admirable Jewish contemporaries in pejorative terms. Furthermore, because of their interest in contemporary church disputes, these portrayals are not just about those in the past. Those in "the church" (later Christians) should learn from these scenes when they are "tempted to consider [them]selves righteous and to look with contempt at others."[85] That is, they should think about ancient Jews, especially when they are at risk of biblical "tribalism," as the model for bad motives.[86] Unfortunately, to express their admirable devotion to following and learning from Jesus and to understanding him better, they find it necessary to deploy such harsh contrasts with Jews in a way, they say, that has relevance even today.

Catholic Church Statements (1965-97)

The second category of sources I want to analyze are contemporary ecclesiastical statements on Jesus and Judaism, in this case a sample of those issued by the Catholic Church. One can discern developments over time between statements, sometimes for the sake of clarity, sometimes in order to deepen or extend a point made earlier. All were issued in the wake of *Nostra Aetate.*[87] Importantly, they reflect their authors' commitments to improved Jewish-Christian relations and, breaking with a long tradition, to fair and accurate presentations of Judaism both past and present. Most unambiguously make the related claim that Jesus was a Jew and that he was grounded in the Old Testament, which is of course canonical Christian scripture. This raises for many the complex issue of Jesus's continuity and discontinuity with his biblical heritage and contemporaneous Jews and Judaism. Avoiding the anti-Judaism that was near-universal in earlier times, the authors seek to ground Jesus in Judaism while establishing how he was more than just another first century Jew.

---

[84] Ibid., 148.
[85] Ibid., 135.
[86] Ibid., 73.
[87] Second Vatican Council, "*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," (1965).

Over time, these statements have increasingly emphasized Jesus's Jewishness as central to his identity. Likewise, statements about Judaism became more positive, often rejecting accusations of legalism and estrangement from God. While there are many reasons for these trends, one should keep in mind the complementary trajectories: 1) Jesus appears more Jewish and 2) Judaism is more favorably portrayed. There is no obvious linkage or causation here, only an apparently logical development based on less biased, more historically-accurate research about how Jesus is related to his original context. Importantly, a more positive view of Judaism naturally makes it easier to locate Jesus within it.

This development takes some time, as can be seen in the comparatively early *Nostra Aetate* (in 1965). A short document, it does no more than start to situate the earliest believers within Judaism. It affirms that "the Apostles, the Church's mainstay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples" were Jews but does not explicitly include Jesus in this list.[88] It is not clear if this was intentional. Likewise, the statement speaks positively about biblical Judaism and the Old Testament, though it ignores post-biblical or post-Jesus Judaism.

About a decade later the 1974 Catholic "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*" began to grapple substantively with Jesus's Jewishness.[89] Most prominently, more explicitly than *Nostra Aetate*, the statement includes Jesus on the list of Jews, alongside his apostles and disciples: "Jesus was born of the Jewish people."[90] Similarly, the statement insists on the need to avoid teachings that "seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light."[91] It speaks somewhat positively of Judaism both during and after the biblical period and the birth of the Church: "The history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather went on to develop a religious tradition."[92] This is a break with the traditional claim that Judaism lost all validity following the coming of Christ.

Nonetheless, it betrays some ambivalence about Judaism. It cannot, from a Christian point of view, have been left unaffected by the Christ-event, for it "deeply affected…that tradition."[93] While "rich in religious values," Judaism had to have been challenged by the "coming of Christ," for he was sent to the entire world (quoting *Ad Gentes* §2).[94] Thus, the statement affirms "the continuity of our faith with that of the earlier Covenant" but subordinates it to an essential discontinuity because of "those elements of Christianity which are original."[95]

It is a delicate balance, for the Catholic Church's affirmation of Jesus's Jewishness simultaneously necessitates some way to differentiate him and his message

[88] Ibid., §4.
[89] Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*" (1974).
[90] Ibid., §III.
[91] Ibid., §II.
[92] Ibid., §III.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Second Vatican Council, "*Ad Gentes*: Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church," (1965).
[95] Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines," §II.

from Judaism. This is where the statement employs vague and unspecific terminology. This is probably partially because the ideas in *Nostra Aetate* require time to be worked out. In the absence of any actual critique of Judaism, the statement speaks repeatedly of Jesus's unique accomplishments vis-à-vis the Jewish and biblical traditions. In him, biblical "promises were fulfilled" and he was "the fulfillment and perfection of the earlier Revelation."[96] Similarly, the statement insists on a fundamental novelty: "his teaching had a profoundly new character" and he was "the bearer of the new Gospel message." In presenting claims in such an ambiguous but largely (and admirably) non-polemical way, the nature of the comparison is unspecified. Left unanswered are questions such as: In what ways were the extant forms of Judaism imperfect and in need of perfecting? How was contemporaneous Judaism in need of renewal? These questions seem unavoidable especially given the use of comparative terminology ("new" implies old; "perfection" implied imperfection; "fulfilled" implies unfulfilled).

The 1985 "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church" attempts to clarify the relationship between Jesus and Judaism by introducing the idea of progress. In order to once again avoid explicit polemical judgments about faults or weaknesses of Judaism, this idea is very useful for the argument that Jesus and the gospel somehow transcend contemporaneous Judaism. Before looking at this claim, however, it is essential to note that it co-exists with a thorough demonstration of Jesus's fidelity to the Torah, Jewish worship, and the festival calendar. "Jesus was and always remained a Jew," and in many ways was like other Jews, such as Pharisees.[97] This idea, however, is once again where the tension lies, for it threatens to undermine what makes Jesus distinct. That is, if he is like other Jews, how is he religiously or soteriologically significant or unique?

The statement relies upon a contrast that mildly casts Jews into an instrumental role in salvation history. Rather than critique them for ignorance or hard-heartedness, the statement puts them on the path to "the fulfilment of God's design" in Jesus.[98] They are not wrong, but they do not have the complete understanding of the tradition that Jesus or later believers in him have: "the definitive meaning of the election of Israel does not become clear" until Jesus.[99] The biblical revelation available to first century Jews was not all that God desired but only an "intermediate stage."[100] Jews were tasked with something vital despite "their difficulty in recognising" the Messiah when he came: "to prepare the coming of Christ and [to] preserve everything that was progressively revealed and given in the course of that preparation."[101]

---

[96] Ibid., §II-III.
[97] Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes," §III:12.
[98] Ibid., §II:9.
[99] Ibid., §II:1.
[100] Ibid., §II:8.
[101] Ibid., §I:8, §II:11.

None of this is hostile to Jewish practice or belief as such, and indeed the statement aims to help Catholics to "learn to appreciate and love" the Jewish tradition.[102] Nonetheless, Judaism apart from Jesus is undeniably wanting somehow, though the locus of this comparative lack is not in, say, a willful misunderstanding of God's will (or some other traditional criticism of Judaism) but a (seemingly non-culpable) absence of one essential feature.

Papal speeches complement and extend concepts in Vatican statements. Pope John Paul II spoke with notable warmth toward Judaism, focusing in particular on the ongoing legitimacy and value of Judaism after Jesus. Likewise, he expresses Jesus's Jewishness, already affirmed in earlier Catholic statements, in greater detail, as seen for example in his 1997 presentation to the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Far from incidental, Jesus's identity in the flesh "is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel."[103] He was grounded in the Old Testament and nourished by contemporaneous Jewish practice. The imagery is colorful. If one denies he was "an authentic son of Israel," then he appears "like a meteor that falls to the earth" without any historical rootedness.

As before, however, Jesus is not entirely at home in contemporaneous Judaism. He was a "son of Israel," but his status and accomplishments were of course much more. He may not have dropped out of the sky (that would be too much discontinuity), but he is different from his fellow Jews and at some variance with contemporary Judaism (avoiding too much continuity and similarity). The terminology to express such difference is ambiguous in meaning but clear in intent. For example, John Paul II said Jesus "enrich[ed] [the Jewish tradition]…with new inspirations and unexpected initiatives."[104] Also, in a speech in Israel in 2000, he said Jesus' "message is new but it does not destroy what went before."[105] This emphasis on newness leaves unexplained what he thinks in Judaism needed renewal or what was improved or corrected. Put another way, he claims that Jesus's accomplished something new without making clear what it was that was old. Likewise, John Paul's use of fulfillment language raises similar questions. Jesus brought God's revelation "to its complete fulfillment."[106] Speaking of the Judaism of Jesus' day, John Paul says he "leads what went before to its fullest potential."[107] One wonders what he has in mind as its unfulfilled, prior status, for John Paul leaves this unexplained. But in some sense the specifics of these charges are not much relevant; the differentiation and contrast are essential features in his discussion of the historical Jesus.

[102] Ibid., §I:8.
[103] Pope John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission" (April 11, 1997), §III.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Pope John Paul II, "Homily on the Mount of the Beatitudes" (March 24, 2000).
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.

Conclusion

The issues raised here are difficult and serious. The broad acceptance that Jesus was a Jew has certainly had paradigm-shifting effects on the study of the historical Jesus. Instead of a distorted view of Jesus as estranged from his Jewish contemporaries or unmoored from mainstream Jewish tradition, we now more accurately see Jesus as a first-century Jew, with familiar Jewish concerns (e.g., how to be faithful toward the God of Israel; divine judgment) and practices (e.g., teaching Torah; observing the commandments). This makes it possible to understand his teachings and actions more clearly, especially because today we know much more about his historical setting and are able to more fully situate Jesus within it.

All the Christian authors and texts analyzed in this paper aspire to do this. However, as I argue, this proves highly challenging theologically, for the effort to establish the uniqueness of the historical Jesus or differentiate him from other Jews rests on certain theological assumptions, above all the uniqueness of the risen Christ. These then influence—and in some cases distort—historical judgments.

Despite an admirable rejection of traditional Christian hostility toward Jews and Judaism, the authors and texts surveyed here struggle to reconcile this with their Christian religious commitments. As I have argued, unfortunately, even historically- and scholarly-informed investigations of Jesus' Jewishness do not automatically lead to a more favorable portrayal of Judaism or improved Jewish-Christian relations. Paradoxically, the more Jesus resembles other Jews, the more important it becomes for some Christians to reinforce how different he is from other Jews.