

# Challenges to Imagining Jesus as a Jew

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## Introduction

In the years after the Second World War, the fact that the Shoah took place “in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raise[d] the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards Jews.”<sup>1</sup> The alarming possibilities of this inquiry impelled Christians to reappraise their teachings about and relations with Jews and led to the realization that certain recurrent ideas conceptually set Jesus apart from the Jewish community of his birth. Indeed, it seems clear that over time, Christian leaders and theologians have—intentionally or unintentionally—effectively conditioned Christians to *not* think of Jesus as a Jew.

In response to this, one pioneering 1947 ecumenical Christian statement “A Call to the Churches: The Ten Points of Seelisberg” urged readers to “Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel ... Remember that the first disciples, the apostles and the first martyrs were Jews.”<sup>2</sup> The authors of this and similar reminders<sup>3</sup> clearly felt them necessary because they believed that the Jewish identity of Jesus held little meaning for many Christians. A 1985 Vatican text pointedly observed that, “a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem

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<sup>1</sup> Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews (henceforth CRRJ), *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998), II.

<http://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/en1.html>

<sup>2</sup> Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism, “A Call to the Churches: The Ten Points of Seelisberg,” points 3 and 4.

<https://www.jcrelations.net/article/an-address-to-the-churches-seelisberg-switzerland-1947.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Second Vatican Council “*Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” 1965, §4: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra\\_aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra_aetate_en.html)) and the Seventh General Convention of the American Lutheran Church, “The American Lutheran Church and the Jewish Community, October 14, 1974, §I: <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na-lutheran/elca1974>.

to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even if Christians know cognitively that Jesus lived and died as a Jew, without much knowledge of Judaism this fact itself means little.

This essay posits that many Christians today find it difficult to imagine Jesus living a thoroughly Jewish life, if it even occurs to them to try to do so, because certain patterns of thought about him became embedded in Christian culture and were passed down the generations to the present day. It explores this premise in four categories: (1) *theologies that dehumanize Jesus*—those that declare or suggest that Jesus was not really a human being or only treat that humanity generically, (2) *contemptuous theologies*<sup>5</sup>—those that denigrate Judaism to assert the superiority of Christianity, (3) *oppositional theologies*—those that set Jesus apart from his fellow Jews by positing a fundamental antagonism between Jesus or Christians and late Second Temple Judaism or Judaism today, often based on caricatures of Judaism, and (4) *unsettling new theological questions*—that arise from taking Jesus’s Jewishness seriously but can consciously or unconsciously deter people from thinking too much about the Jew Jesus.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that over the centuries millions of Christians resonated with the humanity of Jesus by relating their personal or collective sufferings with his. While beyond this essay’s purview, special note should be taken that the devastation of centuries of slavery stimulated African American Christians to connect powerfully with both the humanity of Jesus and with Israel’s story in the Book of Exodus.<sup>6</sup> In recent decades, scholars from this tradition are making important contributions to Christian theologies of Judaism and the Jewish Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. Theologies that Dehumanize Jesus

During the formative period that Christians call the patristic era (broadly, from the second to the eighth centuries C.E.),<sup>8</sup> there were vigorous clashes over emerging Christian doctrines. They included debates between understandings of Jesus as

<sup>4</sup> CRRJ, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” Conclusion. <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrr/documenti-della-commissione/en2.html>

<sup>5</sup> The adjective comes from the influential book of Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the spirituality and history of African American Christians, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> This is a growing body of literature, so I note here only a few works: James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986) and *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See also the related article: Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Theology: Race, Whiteness, and Covenant,” *Religions* 13/129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020129>

<sup>8</sup> It is worth observing that in these centuries when Christians were formulating their essential doctrines, Jews were concurrently composing the rabbinic texts of the Mishnah and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, which would serve as the foundations of Rabbinic Judaism.

a purely divine being who only appeared human versus an emerging “proto-orthodox” or “mainstream” church position that insisted he was an authentic human being as well as fully divine. Ultimately, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. articulated a formulation that became normative for most Christians ever since. While it is obvious that thinking of Jesus as only seemingly human has already dehumanized him, less obvious is that from a modern point of view the mainstream Christian approach also dehumanized Jesus by speaking of his humanity only in universal, nonspecific terms.

### **The Dangers of Docetism**

The question of how Christians in their religious imaginations picture the life of Jesus of Nazareth has long been on my mind. I recall, for instance, one of my Catholic elementary school teachers remarking that as Jesus was being crucified he demonstrated his divinity by not screaming or exhibiting pain. Something about this seemed wrong to me. The incident stuck in my memory.

Years later, when I was a parish Director of Religious Education, one of the volunteer catechists wanted her seven-year-old first-graders to relate personally to Jesus. Planning to have them pretend that they were meeting Jesus as a boy, she asked the pastor to play the part of Jesus and respond to questions the children might pose. They eagerly got into the spirit of things, asking “Jesus” what his favorite games and foods were, if his mother ever yelled at him for misbehaving, whether he had ever cursed after hitting his thumb with a hammer in Joseph’s carpentry work, and so forth. The children were enthusiastic.

The next year the same catechist taught a third-grade class. Having experienced success with it previously, she decided to ask the pastor to repeat the same exercise. After introducing it, however, the class fell silent. Heroic efforts by “Jesus” to engage the students fell flat. As the children were leaving, the puzzled catechist asked one usually very involved student why they hadn’t wanted to chat with the pretend Jesus. Clearly a budding theologian, they answered, “How can you talk to someone who already knows what you are going to say before you can even think of it?” Surely not every child felt this way, but still the general aversion of active nine-year-olds to imagine Jesus at their age or as human begged for some explanation. We came to the working theory that a large factor was the children’s preparation for their First Communion in second grade, a preparation that stressed the Real Presence of Christ Jesus in the Eucharist and his divine identity as the Son of God. *Had their lessons made it more difficult for the children to envision Jesus as a child like themselves whom they could imaginatively befriend?*

A decade or so later, I was a professor at a college that offered an adult religious education series. At a program on the Dead Sea Scrolls, one participant seemed troubled during a comparison of the scrolls with the Gospel teachings of Jesus. Suddenly, this person burst out, “What difference does it make what all these Jewish groups thought? Jesus was God and whatever he said was the truth!”

These and other memorable episodes have led me to suspect that a significant number of Christians are functional docetists (from the Greek *dokein*, “to seem”),

meaning that they can only conceive of Jesus as *apparently* human. Such Christians—perhaps without giving the matter much thought—simply assume that as the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth enjoyed divine omniscience and omnipotence in his human consciousness. He never had to learn anything, knew what the future would bring, and could do whatever he pleased. As one scholar has commented, “To be incapable of curiosity, surprise or disappointment, to be in principle incapable of undergoing cognitive development, to be unable to forget, all these characteristics would be such as to indicate not so much a human being as an alien creature. And yet, many Christians continue to believe that the divinity of Jesus is displayed in these very characteristics.”<sup>9</sup>

Docetism has been an attractive viewpoint from the earliest years of Christian history. Its traces appear in the Fourth Gospel when the Johannine Jesus declares, “you are of this world, I am not of this world” (8:23).<sup>10</sup> By the second century C.E., the notion became explicit. The non-canonical “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” e.g., portrayed the young Jesus as a superhuman, bratty know-it-all. Thus, after bumping into Jesus, another boy suddenly:

... fell down and died. ... The parents of the dead boy came to Joseph and blamed him saying, “Because you have such a boy, you can’t live with us in the village, or else teach him to bless and not curse. He’s killing our children!” So, Joseph summoned [Jesus] and admonished him in private, saying, “Why are you doing all this? These people are suffering and so they hate and harass us.” Jesus said, “I know that these are not your words, still, I’ll keep quiet for your sake. But those people must take their punishment.” There and then his accusers became blind.<sup>11</sup> ... [Later, Jesus’s teacher concludes:] “This child is no ordinary mortal! ... Perhaps he was born before the creation of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

If the docetic outlook makes it challenging to imagine Jesus as an ordinary child, then his crucifixion poses the even greater problem of how a divine being could suffer and die. This conundrum also has very old roots. In the early second-century apocryphal “Gospel of Peter” we read, “And they brought two malefactors, and they crucified the Lord in the midst between them. But he held his peace, *as if he felt no pain*. ... And [later] the Lord called out and cried, ‘*My power, O power, thou hast forsaken me!*’ And having said this, he was taken up.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus’s last words may reflect a related docetic desire to isolate the divine Son of God from the pain-racked human body on the cross. Thus, Irenaeus in the late first century C.E. criticized one Cerinthus for having:

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<sup>9</sup> John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 206. An exception to this would seem to be found in the Black Church, as noted above.

<sup>10</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

<sup>11</sup> “Infancy Gospel of Thomas” (Harold Attridge and Ronald F. Hock, trans) 4:1-5:2.

<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/infancythomas-hock.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:4.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Mauer and George Ogg, trans., “Gospel of Peter” 4:10; 5:19 in Ron Cameron, ed. *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 79. Italics added.

... represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation. ... Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that *then* Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in the non-canonical, gnostic<sup>15</sup> “Apocalypse of Peter,” perhaps written around 200 C.E., the apostle Peter has visionary conversations with Jesus, including one at the time of the crucifixion:

The Savior said to me, “He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this [other] one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, ... Therefore, he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind. ... But what they released was my incorporeal body.”<sup>16</sup>

In such texts, a divine figure (Christ, the Son of God, or the Logos) descends from heaven and assumes an outwardly human appearance. At the crucifixion, the divine essence withdraws and, in some cases, laughs at those who think they are torturing him. It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the various types of gnosticism and Marcionism<sup>17</sup> that lay behind these writings. The point here is simply to indicate the persistence since antiquity of the appeal of imagining a Jesus who is not a human being or “in every respect ... tested as we are” (Heb 4:15). Obviously, if Jesus is not thought of as a real flesh-and-blood human being, then his being a Jew is immaterial.

### **Culturally Conditioned Chalcedonian Christology**

Certainly, the emerging mainstream “classical christology” of the patristic period rejected the docetic notion of an only seemingly human Jesus. Using prevailing metaphysical concepts and terms, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. asserted

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<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* XXVI: 1, *Early Christian Writings* at: <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book1.html>. Italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Related to docetism, gnosticism is a constellation of religious ideas in antiquity that took diverse philosophical, Jewish, and Christian forms. It held that a divine revealer would descend or had descended from spiritual realms to impart secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that would save those who heeded it from the corrupt material world.

<sup>16</sup> James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard, trans., “The Apocalypse of Peter,” *The Gnostic Society Library* at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/apopet.html>. See similarly Roger A. Bullard and Joseph A. Gibbons, trans., “The Second Treatise of the Great Seth,” *The Gnostic Society Library* at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/2seth.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Named after Marcion of Sinope, who in the early second century CE taught that Christ had made known the loving and merciful God who was superior to the punishing and angry deity of the Old Testament.

both the full divinity *and* full humanity of Christ with a formulation known as “the hypostatic union.” It declared him to be “One and same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, acknowledged to be unconfusedly, unalterably, undividedly, inseparably in two natures, since *the difference of the natures is not destroyed by the union, but on the contrary, the character of each nature is preserved.*”<sup>18</sup> Christ cannot be thought of as a hybridized intermingling of human and divine “natures”—like blue and yellow paints that blend to become green.

Reflecting on a Jesus who has two “natures” that are united but distinct is not, well, natural for Christians today who do not think in the same metaphysical categories as fifth-century Christians. Those steeped in modernity regard people psychologically and developmentally as possessing consciousnesses that are shaped by their life events and cultures. Moderns do not think of human beings as specific instantiations of a human “nature” that exists in some realm of ideas apart from lived experience. Instead, those twenty-first century Christians who are shaped by Modernity conceive of human beings in psychological terms as possessing autonomous consciousnesses with self-awareness. Therefore, they wonder about Jesus’s self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Christians who prefer to imagine a Jesus learning about the world while walking around Galilee, Samaria, and Judea can find support in Chalcedon’s insistence that his human “nature” retains all human traits. Therefore, in modern terms, his personal knowledge of God and of himself had to grow through natural human processes, as with every other human being. However, without rendering patristic philosophical language into modern frames of reference, expressions such as the hypostatic union are not immediately meaningful to modern Christians, thereby allowing the alluring simplicity of docetic beliefs to hold sway.<sup>19</sup>

The corrosive consequences of docetism have been movingly described by Raymond E. Brown:

A Jesus who walked through the world knowing exactly what the morrow would bring, knowing with certainty that three days after his death his Father would raise him up, is a Jesus who can arouse our admiration, but still a Jesus far from us. He is a Jesus far from mankind that can only hope in the future and believe in God’s goodness, far from a mankind that must face the supreme uncertainty of death with faith but without knowledge of what is beyond. On the other hand, a Jesus for whom the future was as such a mystery, a dread, and a hope as it is for us and yet, at the same time a Jesus who would say, “Not

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<sup>18</sup> “Decree of the Council of Chalcedon” in Richard A. Norris, Jr., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 159. Italics added.

<sup>19</sup> See the important discussion of the historical conditioning of dogmatic formulations in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*: Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day,” June 24, 1973, §5. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19730705\\_mysterium-ecclesiae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html)

my will but yours”—this is a Jesus who could effectively teach us how to live, for this is a Jesus who would have gone through life’s real trials.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Chalcedonian christology sought to uphold Jesus’s humanity, its metaphysical understanding of human “nature” abetted the “de-Judaizing process” by which the “Jewishness of Jesus, of his mother, his disciples, of the primitive Church, was lost from view.”<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II sought to counter this de-Judaization when he said:

Jesus’s human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. ... By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus, he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people’s long history. ... Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation had to be rooted in centuries of preparation.<sup>22</sup>

John Paul’s description of Jesus as “humanly” coming to know Israel’s scriptures has an important implication: Chalcedonian christology inadequately declares the particularity of Jesus’s Jewishness.

## 2. The Ancient Polemic Against Jews and Judaism

At this juncture a conclusion reached by patristics scholar Robert Wilken is highly germane: “Christian beliefs are so deeply rooted in attitudes toward Judaism that it is impossible to disentangle what Christians say about Christ and the Church from what they say about Judaism.”<sup>23</sup> This insight applies to both docetic and proto-orthodox Christians, who were both motivated by historical and social forces to develop “an anti-Jewish tradition [that] stamped its mark in differing ways on

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 104-105. Brown also cites a notable statement of Cyril of Alexandria, “We have admired his goodness in that for love of us he has not refused to descend to such a low position as to bear all that belongs to our [human] nature, included in which is ignorance.” Brown adds that although the fifth-century Cyril was not grappling with Jesus’s knowledge in modern terms, “the admission which Cyril makes is significant” (102 and fn. 92).

<sup>21</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations,” 1975.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, “Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission,” April 11, 1997, §3. His comments also warned against “the Marcionite temptation [that] is making its appearance again in our time” (§2): [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1997/april/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19970411\\_pont-com-biblica.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1997/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19970411_pont-com-biblica.html)

<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria’s Exegesis and Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 229.

Christian doctrine and teaching in theology, apologetics, preaching and in the liturgy.”<sup>24</sup> We must ask: whether and to what degree patristic-era christological formulations were tainted by being composed more-or-less concurrently with an entire corpus of *adversus Iudaeos* (“against Jews”) literature.<sup>25</sup>

To revisit the illustrative docetic quotations given above, notice that these texts presupposed serious hostility between Jesus and his kinfolk. In the “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” Joseph is alarmed because his Nazarene neighbors “hate and harass us” and are struck blind for disrespecting Jesus’s divine person. In the “Gospel of Peter,” it is “the Jews” who are “the people” to whom Pilate delivers Jesus. Having “gotten power over him,” they crown him with thorns and scourge him. It is they “who crucified the Lord.”<sup>26</sup> In the visions in the “Apocalypse of Peter,” Peter fears to be killed by “the priests and the people running up ... with stones,” to which Jesus replies, “Peter, I have told you many times that they are blind ones who have no guide.”

Proto-orthodox writers held the same inimical attitudes toward Jews as their docetic foes, as is evident not only specifically in the *adversus Iudaeos* literature but also in numerous patristic era texts of other genres. Many widespread anti-Jewish themes are summarized in a frequently quoted passage by Origen around 248 CE:

One fact, then, which proves that Jesus was something divine and sacred, is this, that Jews should have suffered on His account now for a lengthened time calamities of such severity. ... For they committed a crime of the most unhalloved kind, in conspiring against the Savior of the human race in that city [Jerusalem] where they offered up to God a worship containing the symbols of mighty mysteries. It accordingly behooved that city where Jesus underwent these sufferings to perish utterly, and the Jewish nation to be overthrown, and

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<sup>24</sup> Group of French Catholic Bishops, “Declaration of Repentance,” September 30, 1997:

<https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/other-conferences-of-catholic-bishops/cefr1997>.

These bishops were marking the 57th anniversary of the passage of antisemitic laws by the collaborationist Vichy government during the Nazi occupation of France. Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, president of the CRRJ (1989-2001), repeated these words on May 28, 1998 in an address, “Reflections Regarding the Vatican’s Statement on the Shoah,” two weeks after the Commission released “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/educational-and-liturgical-materials/classic-articles/cassidy1998may28>

<sup>25</sup> A well-known early and detailed study of this topic was Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1974). Her controversial claim that anti-Judaism existed from the first days of the Christian proclamation is even more difficult to sustain today with such developments as “Paul within Judaism” scholarship. Nevertheless, she helpfully identified key elements in the legacy of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric with which post-Shoah writers have grappled, including emeritus Pope Benedict XVI: “The negative judgments about the Jews, which also reflect the political and social problems of coexistence, are well known and have repeatedly led to anti-Semitic failures” (“Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise *De Iudaeis*,” *Communio* 45 [Spring 2018]: 166).

<sup>26</sup> “Gospel of Peter,” 1:1-4:10.

the invitation to happiness offered them by God to pass to others—the Christians, I mean, to whom has come the doctrine of a pure and holy worship, and who have obtained new laws, in harmony with the established constitution in all countries ...<sup>27</sup>

Here the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE is adduced as proof of God’s anger against “the Jewish nation” for the crucifixion of Jesus. The symbolic rituals of the destroyed Temple have also given way to the “pure and holy worship” of Christians. These themes often recur in patristic literature, as the following few examples illustrate:

Around 250 C.E., Cyprian of Carthage suggested that when a Christian addresses God as “our Father,” he or she “rebukes and condemns the Jews, who not only unbelievably despised Christ, who had been announced to them by the prophets, and sent first to them, but also cruelly put Him to death; and these cannot now call God their Father, since the Lord confounds and confutes them, saying, ‘You are born of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father you will do. For he was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him [citing John 8:44].’”<sup>28</sup>

Augustine of Hippo circa 400 C.E. preached that “The Jews hold Him, the Jews insult, the Jews bind Him, crown Him with thorns, dishonor Him with spitting, scourge Him, overwhelm Him with revilings, hang Him upon the tree, pierce Him with a spear, last of all bury Him. ... What a dreadful thing is it to kill Christ! Yet the Jews killed Him, [still] many afterwards believed on Him and drank His [Eucharistic] blood ... forgiven the sin which they committed.”<sup>29</sup>

Each of these and many similar writings should be understood according to their own contexts and circumstances, which, as with the docetic materials above, is beyond the scope of this essay. My purpose here is to show that ideas that developed early on were absorbed into the Christian collective consciousness and literally went uncritiqued until after the Shoah. Thus, Pope Pius X was famously quoted as saying in 1904, “The Jewish religion was the foundation of our own; but it was superseded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot concede it any further validity. The Jews, who ought to have been the first to acknowledge Jesus Christ, have not done so to this day.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the draft of a never promulgated encyclical prepared in 1938 for Pope Pius XI asserted that “the authentic basis of the social separation of the Jews from the rest of humanity ... is directly religious in character. ... The Savior, whom God had sent ... was rejected by that people, violently repudiated, and condemned as a criminal by the highest tribunals of the

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<sup>27</sup> Origen, “*Contra Celsum*,” IV, 22, trans., Frederick Crombie.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04164.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, “Treatise 4 on the Lord’s Prayer,” §10.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050704.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed,” §§10, 15.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1307.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York/London: Herzl Press, Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 1602.

Jewish nation, in collusion with the pagan authorities who held the Jewish people in bondage. Ultimately, the Savior was put to death.”<sup>31</sup>

No wonder, then, that the most extreme effort to “de-Judaize” Jesus was mounted by antisemitic, Nazi-influenced twentieth-century theologians who argued, for instance, that since Mary, the mother of Jesus, was preserved from sin by God through her Immaculate Conception, “what is so hereditarily corrupting in Jewry is excluded from her and also from Jesus.” Others went so far as to claim that “Jesus was a Galilean born from an Aryan mother.”<sup>32</sup>

A dehumanized Jesus, an otherworldly Jesus, and a de-Judaized Jesus, combined with a culturally conditioned antipathy to Jews, all helped make the Shoah possible. As Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews from (CRRJ) from 2001-2010, put it, “cutting itself off from its Jewish roots for centuries weakened the church, a weakness that became evident in the altogether too feeble resistance against the [Nazi] persecution of Jews.”<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The Oppositional Imagination

However, Christians today do not need to encounter blatant antisemitism or an Aryan Jesus to be deterred from imagining him as a Jew. As already mentioned, without some sense of what living Jewishly meant in either the first- or twenty-first centuries, how can one imagine Jesus living a Jewish life? In particular, “there is no doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law [the Torah] (cf. Gal 4:4) ... [and] that he was trained in the law’s observance. He extolled respect for it (cf. Mt 5:17-20) and invited obedience to it (cf. Mt 8:4). The rhythm of his life was marked by observance of pilgrimages on great feasts, even from his infancy (cf. Lk 2:41-50; Jn 2:13; 7:10 etc.).”<sup>34</sup> Since observance of the Torah is not integral to Christian life today, then, as Barbara U. Meyer has observed, “Remembering Jesus as observant of Torah-commandments ... has a distancing effect on Christians. ... By not following in Jesus’ footsteps and observing [those] commandments as he did

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<sup>31</sup> John LaFarge, Gustav Gundlach, and Gustave Desbuquois, “*Humani Generis Unitas*” [draft], §§ 133, 135, in Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (trans. Steven Rendall; New York/San Diego/London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997), 133, 135.

<sup>32</sup> Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 108, 189. For a detailed treatment see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Cardinal Kasper, “Foreword,” 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, MI / Cambridge, U.K. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), xvi.

<sup>34</sup> CRRJ, “Notes,” §III, 2. See also elsewhere in this volume, Barbara U. Meyer, “Time According to Jesus Christ the Jew.”

... Christian identity is established in distinction to the person remembered as the heart and inception of the Christian way of life.”<sup>35</sup>

As if these difficulties were not enough, there also seems to be a related and widespread tendency among Christians today to understand Jesus as fundamentally opposed to the Judaism of his day. Therefore, the Judaism of his day rejected him and caused his execution. It thus becomes a straightforward matter to resolve the cognitive dissonance between a Torah-observant Jesus and his non-Torah observant followers of today by supposing that he did not really care about the Torah or that he interpreted it in ways that put him outside the borders of acceptable Jewish practice, particularly for Pharisees. Note the claims in recent online publications, mostly prominent national religious ones:

“It is the Pharisees that hate the sabbath, because they hate the sabbath’s Lord [Jesus]. Their minds are more withered than the man’s hand, in need of sabbath healing. ... We often follow the Pharisees in refusing to open up our withered minds to Jesus; we shrink our evil lives to nothingness while driving nails into his hands.”<sup>36</sup>

“Jesus did radical things and broke all of the rules of organized religion in order to reach out to those who needed healing and help the most. The Pharisees and other religious people hated Jesus for his ministry which eventually lead to His crucifixion.”<sup>37</sup>

“In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites who often follow the laws to the letter, rather than adhering to the idea behind the law. ... This is part of what Jesus was trying to get across to the scribes and Pharisees, that his disciples do not need to ritually cleanse themselves before eating because that was a law for the world before the Messiah.”<sup>38</sup>

“Idolatry, or worshiping a false God, was a primal sin for monotheistic Israel, and a theme underlying the conflict between Jesus and his opponents, who accused him of blasphemy for claiming equality with God.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 183.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Boersma, “Withered Hands and Minds,” *First Things*, January 29, 2024. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/01/withered-hands-and-minds>. Besides caricaturing them, the final sentence suggests that Pharisees drove nails into Jesus’s hands, even though they are mostly absent in the Gospels’ passion narratives.

<sup>37</sup> Julie Nichols, “The Marginalized and Modern Day Pharisees,” *Patheos*, January 30, 2023, arguing for greater concern for LGBTQIA+ and neurodiverse people by the Catholic Church. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/alltexansnotsometexans/2023/01/the-marginalized-and-modern-day-pharisees/>

<sup>38</sup> Jill Rice, “The Bible Is Filled with Laws. Do We Follow All of Them?” *America*, February 5, 2024. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/02/05/bible-scripture-laws-testament-247178>

<sup>39</sup> Pat Marrin, “Pencil Preaching,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 29, 2023. This comment overlooks the fact that the Gospels present scenes in which later arguments over Jesus’s identity are retrojected back into narratives of Jesus’s ministry, e.g., John 5:18. See Pontifical Biblical Commission,

“It is uncomfortable to say today that Jesus was killed by the Jews. And for good reason: That has led to the most vile and ugly racism the world has ever known. Theologically, it is crucial to say that *we* killed Jesus. All of us, Jew and Gentile. But for the sake of this article, let’s be specific and historical: Jesus was killed by his people, the Jews.”<sup>40</sup>

All these quotations are symptomatic of the “oppositional imagination” at work.<sup>41</sup> They collectively show that seeing late Second Temple Judaism and Jesus as intrinsically conflicting is linked to the so-called “deicide” accusation that God cursed the Jewish people as a whole because of the crucifixion of God’s Son. People inured to this perspective will stress verses from the Gospel passion narratives that can be read to support this construal while overlooking other verses that mitigate against it.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to the execution of Jesus, the oppositional imagination simultaneously attacks Jews and “de-Judaizes” Jesus by having him collectively “cast out” by “the Jews.” And by removing or minimizing Roman culpability, Jesus is additionally set apart from the thousands of his Jewish brothers whom the Romans also tortured to death by crucifixion to enforce their rule.

An aspect of the oppositional imagination is that New Testament passages themselves can foster it, as is suggested by some of the readings above. Particularly disturbing in this regard is the Gospel of John, whose authors may have meant to convey that it was fitting for their readers to feel antagonism toward their own Jewish contemporaries.<sup>43</sup>

There is a further way in which the oppositional imagination sets Christians against Jews and inhibits an imaginative relationship with Jesus the Jew. In an extreme dualistic form, people who think oppositionally conclude that for either

“*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*: Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” April 21, 1964, §VI-IX. <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/psc-1964> and CRRJ, “Notes,” §IV, 21,A.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Galli, “Killing Jesus’s Brothers and Sisters,” *Christianity Today*, January 3, 2020. This online text was edited the next day to: “Legally and in fact, it was the Romans who literally killed Jesus. But for the sake of this article, let’s take note of this as well: Jesus was killed at the instigation of the Jews, who chanted, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ forcing the hand of a weak-willed Pilate.” This revised version still sees “the Jews” as ultimately to blame. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/killing-of-jesus-jewish-brothers-and-sisters.html>.

<sup>41</sup> For a fuller treatment, see my “Reading the New Testament with an Oppositional Imagination,” Mary C. Boys, Marc Brettler, and Joel Lohr, eds., *Disruptive Readings: The Work and Wisdom of Amy-Jill Levine* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, forthcoming).

<sup>42</sup> E.g., one can readily construct a combined passion narrative based on the Gospel texts in which Roman responsibility is made clear. The fact that the role of Jews has been highlighted in the interpretation of the passion narratives in the Christian tradition is itself a manifestation of the oppositional imagination. See Philip A. Cunningham, “Much Will Be Required of the Person Entrusted with Much: Assembling a Passion Drama from the Four Gospels,” in Paula Fredriksen, ed., *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ: Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004), 49-64.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (Francis J. Moloney, ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) pp. 167-168. See also Sonya Shetty Cronin, *Raymond Brown, ‘The Jews’ and the Gospel of John: From Apologetics to Apology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 134-138, 154-186.

Judaism or Christianity to be true, the other must be false. Thus, there must always be “a historic enmity of the Jewish people to Christianity, creating a perpetual tension between Jew and Gentile,” as was claimed by the 1938 encyclical draft cited earlier. Therefore, it had continued, the church is not blind “to the spiritual dangers to which contact with Jews can expose souls or make her unaware of the need to safeguard her children against spiritual contagion.”<sup>44</sup> This attitude runs directly contrary to the efforts of post-Shoah churches “to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, because of its resonances with Marcionism, the presumptions of the oppositional imagination are actually opposed to Christian faith itself.

#### 4. Current Constructive Theological Challenges

Finally, a deeply seated impediment to encountering Jesus the Jew might be a conscious or unconscious sense that the effort might imperil long-established Christian and Jewish self-identities constructed upon “centuries of reciprocal prejudice and opposition.”<sup>46</sup>

Christians have more at stake since they must address core matters of christology. But Jews also face challenges. For example, several Orthodox rabbis stated in 2015 that, “Both Jews and Christians have a common *covenantal* mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty” and that they “will remain dedicated to the *Covenant* by playing an active role together in redeeming the world.”<sup>47</sup> Even if carefully phrased, the idea that Christians might be covenanting with the God of Israel raises a difficult question for a Jewish perspective on Christianity: If Christians are covenanting with the God of Israel, then the first-century Jew Jesus must somehow have been key to bringing that about. How is that to be understood Jewishly?<sup>48</sup>

Turning to a christological example, if it is crucial that Christians engage with the Jewish identity of Jesus, then they cannot avoid reflecting on what Jews themselves mean by “Jewishness.” The Jewish people, wrote Michael Wyschogrod, “is first and foremost a communion of family, of kinship, of descent from Abraham, of blood communion. . . . Israel is, as it were, an idea incarnated in the flesh of a people. The contrast between baptism and circumcision defines the difference [with Christianity]. The one is water, symbol of the spirit, leaving no external change but

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<sup>44</sup> La Farge et al., *Humani Generis Unitas*, §§141-142 in Passelecq and Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI*, 251-252.

<sup>45</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, §4.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, “Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission,” §2.

<sup>47</sup> “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians” (2015). Italics added.

<https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/orthodox-2015dec4>.

<sup>48</sup> See my “Reflections from a Roman Catholic on a Reform Theology of Christianity,” *CCAR Journal* (Spring 2005): 61-73.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YTySx4fnGMGNixC5MZ1WSgfUkZuJpwpq/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YTySx4fnGMGNixC5MZ1WSgfUkZuJpwpq/view?usp=drive_link)

an internal transformation. The other is a cutting into the flesh, the organ of generation, leaving a permanent mark in the flesh of a people that thereby embraces the covenant with its flesh.”<sup>49</sup>

Jesus, then, was born and circumcised into this “blood communion” that is the people of Israel. For Wyschogrod, Judaism is a “corporeal election,”<sup>50</sup> and so he reasons:

[For Christians] to believe that God became incarnate in Jesus the Jew is to encounter the Divine Presence in the people 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 the 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.<sup>51</sup>

Although Wyschogrod regards this concept of concentrating the divine presence into a single Jew as erroneous, he feels that “it was a mistake that helped me better understand a dimension of Judaism—God’s indwelling in the people Israel—that I would probably not have understood as clearly [otherwise].”<sup>52</sup>

Conversely, how might Christians christologically engage with Jewishness as “corporeal election”? One approach is to relate Paul of Tarsus’s understanding of resurrection as the (oxymoronic) transformation of a physical body into a “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15) and to his conviction that the raising of Jesus enables non-Jews to become “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29)? Is it the transformed *Jewish* body of the raised Jesus that links Christians to the promises that the God of Israel made to Abraham? Or from another direction, does the raised Jesus remain a Jew? If not, does that mean, since Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20), that at the general resurrection of the dead, anticipated by both Jews and Christians, all the distinctive ethnic and cultural aspects of humans in general become irrelevant? In the case of Jesus would this not amount to a suspicious *eschatological* de-Judaization?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. by R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 128-129.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1983).

<sup>51</sup> Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 178.

<sup>52</sup> Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 178.

<sup>53</sup> See the provocative remark of Jon D. Levenson: “To the rabbis, resurrection without the restoration of Israel, including its renewed adherence to Torah, was incomprehensible. And without the expectation of resurrection, the restoration of Israel would be less than something the rabbis thought the Torah had always intended it to be—the ultimate victory of the God of life.” *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006), 229.

This is not the place to explore these questions. My point is that the implications of taking Jesus's Jewishness seriously can consciously or unconsciously deter people from thinking about it too much because of the discomfiting and unfamiliar topics it raises.

### Conclusion

The CRRJ stated in 1985 that "Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated."<sup>54</sup> This directive has not been implemented, at least in the United States where, ironically, the world's largest diaspora Jewish community lives. A 2022 survey of American Catholics concluded that this forty-year-old instruction "has not been measurably enacted" and that there is "a need in Catholic formation for more focused preaching and education about ongoing Jewish covenantal life and Catholic principles of biblical interpretation."<sup>55</sup> This situation persists despite decades of detailed recommendations and commitments from offices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)<sup>56</sup> and similar ecclesiastical calls for ongoing education about Jews and Judaism in statements from other Christian traditions.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, a final reason why many Christians find it difficult to relate to a Jewish Jesus is the lack of thoughtful and intentional spiritual formation to enable them to do so. A crucial step in forming Christians' imagination about the Jew Jesus, therefore, is to follow through on the educational and homiletic principles that many churches have already articulated. As John Paul II said forty years ago, "It is only a question of studying them carefully, of immersing oneself in their teachings and *of putting them into practice.*"<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> CRRJ, "Notes," §I.2.

<sup>55</sup> Kirill Bumin, Philip A. Cunningham, Adam Gregerman, and Motti Inbari, "American Catholic Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 18.1 (2023): 1-22 at 22. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/scjr/article/view/16589/11789>

<sup>56</sup> USCCB, Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA), "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations" (1967, 1985); National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations" (1975); BCEIA, "Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion" (1988); USCCB, Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, "God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching" (1988); BCEIA, "Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's 'We Remember'" (2001); and BCEIA, "Recommitment to Relationship with Jewish Community" (2022). All these documents can be accessed at: <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops>.

<sup>57</sup> See <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources>.

<sup>58</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome," April 13, 1986, §5. Italics added. <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/jp2-86apr13>