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Resisting the Abuse of Jesus's Jewishness: Lessons from Modern and Medieval Palestine

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Introduction

In 1973 and 1974, Markus Barth, a Swiss Reformed scholar and advocate for Jewish-Christian reconciliation, delivered two important lectures to a Jewish-Christian audience: "What Does It Mean that Jesus is a Jew?" and "Israel and the Palestinians." When he published the two lectures side by side a few years later, he explained how the two, for him, were related. "My thesis," he wrote, is that "loyalty" to Jesus entails "critical solidarity with all the Jewish brothers and sisters who are living today, particularly with the Israelis who are fighting for survival." He also noted that such solidarity and support can only come by "a new structuring of the relationship to the Palestinians."[1]

Despite this strong association of Jesus's Jewishness and support for the State of Israel, Barth's two lectures encountered wildly different receptions. The first was "met with approval," the second with "passionate protest." "Many found it incomprehensible," he later wrote, "that the same author could apparently contradict himself so blatantly. They viewed the second lecture as a slander of the first. … The well-founded yes to Israel seemed in a scandalous way to have been replaced by a subsequent rude no."[2] While Barth's second lecture can hardly be described as "anti-Israel" or "anti-Zionist," let alone "pro-Palestinian," his willingness simply to acknowledge the plight of the Palestinian people at all was, nonetheless, enough for many to question his devotion to Jesus's Jewishness. Warning him in 1975 that to "sit in judgment over Israel" was "a very dangerous enterprise," Michael Wyschogrod, a fellow advocate of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, told Barth plainly: "[T]he face of the living Jew is the closest you will ever get in this life to seeing the face of your Lord...If you separate yourself from the consensus of this people, you are separated from your Lord."[3] For Wyschogrod,

[1] Markus Barth, *Jesus the Jew: What Does It Mean That Jesus Is a Jew / Israel and the Palestinians* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 5.
[2] Ibid., 6
[3] Quoted in Mark Lindsay, "'The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Enemy': Markus Barth's Awkward Hostility to Critics of His Theology of Reconciliation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 77 (May 2024):

Barth could not claim to be devoted to his Jewish Savior without supporting the Jewish State's political and military interests.

By the 1970s, the general sentiment of Wyschogrod's words of admonition here had become the norm, not the exception, in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Advocates of Jewish-Christian rapprochement time and again looked to Jesus's Jewishness as a key reason why Christians ought to be more supportive of Zionist and/or Israeli causes.[4] *Because* Christian history had generally forgotten or outright denied Jesus's Jewishness, so the two-pronged argument regularly went, Christians must now recover *this* particular aspect of Jesus's earthly identity—that is, his general identity as a "Jew," not, say, a "Nazarene" or "Bethlehemite" in particular—in part, by standing with Zionist or Israeli causes. Almost entirely absent from these positions and discussions was any serious consideration of the history of and contemporary problems facing the Christian communities in the Holy Land negatively impacted by such causes. The discussion was almost entirely European and North American.[5]

However beneficial the "recovery" of Jesus's Jewishness has been for overcoming Christian antisemitism or for Jewish-Christian rapprochement more broadly, the frequent and continued employment of his identity "according to the flesh"[6] for nationalistic purposes has constituted nothing less than an abuse of his Jewish identity—an abuse, moreover, that is frequently predicated on sweeping generalizations of the deficiencies of Christian history and theology. In what follows, I will address both aspects of this argument—that is, both the nationalistic coopting of Jesus's Jewish identity and the particular portrayal of history, especially Christian, on which it is based. In the first part, I will consider recent examples of the political use of Jesus's Jewishness as well as its roots in both modern history and scholarly language. In the second part, I will turn to explore the environment and writings of a medieval Palestinian thinker (and important Christian saint), John of Damascus, whose sociopolitical environment and approach to Jesus's Jewishness (which he neither forgot nor denied) can provide valuable lessons for understanding the varied ways that Jesus's Jewishness might contribute to genuine Jewish-Christian reconciliation, especially one that centralizes, rather than ignores, the continuous but fading presence of Christians and Christianity in the land in which Jesus lived.

126–37, here 132, citing archives to which I do not have access: Michael Wyschogrod to Markus Barth, 1 January 1975. Markus Barth Papers (Princeton). Series II. Box 21, file 545.

[4] See some of the figures, to whom we will return below, discussed in Michael G. Azar, "'Supersessionism': The Political Origin of a Theological Neologism," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 16 (2021): 1–25.

[5] As Krister Stendahl aptly and correctly observed in 1978, "There are few areas in which Western dominance has been more obvious than in Jewish-Christian relations" ("Jewish-Christian Relations in the Wider Perspective of Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies," in *Christian-Jewish Relations in Ecumenical Perspective, with a Special Emphasis on Africa: A Report on the Conference of the WCC Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, Jerusalem 16–26 June, 1977*, ed. Franz von Hammerstein [WCC, 1978], 1–6, here 1).

[6] Cf. 2 Cor 5:16, a verse that has been key for Christian approaches to Christology.

Abusing Jesus's Jewishness

In the spring of 2024, as Israel's months-long collective punishment of Gaza was grinding on, each community of the besieged strip's Christians, sheltering in Gaza City's St. Porphyrios Orthodox Church and Holy Family Catholic Church, gathered (though weeks apart) to commemorate the Christian Passover: the celebration of life through death, the deliverance of God's people from darkness and oppression toward light and freedom. Over the course of these celebrations, two especially disturbing articles were penned by veteran figures in the field of Jewish-Christian relations. In the first, published on the day those sheltering at Holy Family were commemorating Maundy Thursday, the author argued that Jesus was not and should never be thought of as "Palestinian"—not even as a "Palestinian Jew."[7] Though expressing concern for the Christian communities who had lived under the Palestinian Authority or Hamas, the author's use of Jesus's Jewishness distanced him from historic and contemporary Palestinians and identified him more closely with contemporary Israelis. Through a particular reading of history[8] and a selective obfuscation of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (in which any blame on the State of Israel is entirely absent),[9] the author declares that any attempt to "pretend" that "Jesus [was] a 'Palestinian' or even 'Palestinian Jew,'" especially

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[7] Paula Fredriksen, "This Easter, Let's Not Try to Pretend Jesus Was a 'Palestinian Jew,'" *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/28/easter-jesus-not-palestinian-jew/.

[8] Contrary to a popular assertion furthered in this article, there is no firm evidence that Rome renamed the region in which Jesus lived as "Palestine" as a "deliberate way to 'de-Judaize' the territory" (though such was the case with the renaming of "Jerusalem" as "Aelia Capitolina"). See, for example, David Jacobson, "When Palestine Meant Israel," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May-June 2001): 42–47. Even though Louis H. Feldman (to whom Jacobson refers) makes the claim that the name was changed to "Palestine" to "obliterate the Jewish character of the Holy Land," he nevertheless admits both that "there is no evidence as to precisely who changed the name of Judaea to Palestine and precisely when this was done" and that the evidence linking Hadrian to the change (a tendency that survives well in both scholarly and popular writing) is "circumstantial" ("Observations on the Name Palestine," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61 [1990]: 1–23, here 15 and 19). For a closer examination of the history of the "Palestine" name, see Zachary J. Foster, "The Invention of Palestine" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2017).

[9] The author, for example, cites the 1995 interim agreement (and a severely outdated 1995 article about the agreement) to claim that Bethlehem is not "occupied." Such a portrayal tendentiously relies solely on the civil authority that the Palestinian Authority has within the urban portions of Bethlehem but ignores the other, ongoing elements of the Israeli occupation of the city, ranging from unilaterally imposed border controls to control over the citizens' agricultural and water usage. On the latter, for example, see "Parched: Israel's Policy of Water Deprivation in the West Bank," B'Tselem Report, April 2023, https://www.btselem.org/publications/202305_parched. The author moreover selectively points only to Muslim control in the West Bank and Gaza as the chief cause of Christian emigration and hardship, thereby ignoring entirely the abundant availability of statistical and journalistic evidence that shows otherwise. See, for example, "Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating It," Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) Report, June 2020, https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%20Findings%20of%20Emigration%20Among%20Palestinian%20Christians%20June%202020.pdf. For further exploration, see Michael G. Azar, "The Greek Orthodox Church under Israeli Sovereignty," in Tois Pasin ho Kairos*: Judaism and Orthodox Christianity Facing the Future*, ed. Nicholas de Lange, Elena Narinskaya, Sybil Romain (Lanham, Md.: Lexington/Fortress, 2023), 41–52.

at Easter, is "an act of cultural and political appropriation" that "rips Jesus out of his Jewish context" and both first-century and Israeli Jews "out of their ancestral homeland." Because the author positively associates Jesus's Jewishness with contemporary Israelis, denies him any sort of affinity with Christians in Gaza or elsewhere in Palestine (let alone other Palestinians), and assigns all blame to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas—but none to the State of Israel—for Christian hardship and emigration, the reader is left with the impression that to accept Jesus as a Jew entails supporting and sympathizing with the current Jewish State—not Gaza, where the Jewish Jesus, the author writes, "would find an extremely hostile environment." Presumably, but problematically, the author means among Muslims, not the Christians who were worshiping Jesus in Gaza, but she does not specify. What is more, though she expresses a concern for the wellbeing of Christians, she entirely ignores their own many statements against the Israeli bombardment and humanitarian blockade against Gaza, which were bound to force them out of their ancestral homeland.[10]

A few weeks later, while those seeking refuge at St. Porphyrios commemorated Holy Week, a second article of a similar vein was published. This time, the author argued not against identifying Jesus as a "Palestinian" per se, but explicitly against Christian calls for a ceasefire.[11] Here again, the author makes the case while expressing concern for Gaza's Christians, though he also silences their voices and obfuscates their calls for a ceasefire. Speaking for them, but not to them, the author suggests that an immediate ceasefire would entail the end of Christians in Gaza and elicits Jesus's Jewishness to garner support for Israel's military actions: It is "strange," he says, that Christians who had called for a ceasefire would "identify as disciples of Jesus" but "show little identification with, or concern for, Israeli Jews." Thus, he explains: "Jesus was a Jew who lived his entire life in Jewish Judea and Galilee, now called Israel." To this evident support for renaming at least part of the State of Palestine's land as "Israel" (much of "Judea" is in the West Bank), the author adds a historical claim similar to that of the previous article, and equally misleading: The very name "Palestine," he suggests, was intended to "suppress

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[10] Since October 2023, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which oversees the Orthodox church in Gaza, and the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which oversees the Catholic church—together with the rest of the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches of Jerusalem—have issued numerous and unambiguous statements both calling for a ceasefire and condemning Israeli humanitarian blockades and attacks on church properties. Already in the first week of the bombardment, they called on the "State of Israel, with the support of the International Community, to allow humanitarian supplies to enter Gaza so that the thousands of innocent civilians may receive medical treatment and basic supplies" ("Statement on the Escalating Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza," Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, October 13, 2023, https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/announcements/statement-of-the-patriarchs-and-heads-of-the-churches-in-jerusalem-on-the-escalating-humanitarian-crisis-in-gaza/). They lamented a few weeks later that "despite" their "repeated calls for a humanitarian ceasefire," the violence was continuing ("Statement on the Celebration of Advent and Christmas in the Midst of the War," Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, November 10, 2023).

[11] Eugene B. Korn, "An Immediate Cease-Fire in Gaza Will Not Bring Peace to the Holy Land," *America: The Jesuit Review*, May 1, 2024, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/05/01/israel-hamas-ceasefire-terrorism-247825/.

Jewish nationalism and rid Judea of its Jewish identity." Once again, the reader is left with the impression that anyone genuinely invested in the Jewish Jesus ought to react against this act of appropriation and, instead, default to the Jewish State's current interests, from the river to the sea.

A Modern History of Hostility

The way both articles employ the Jewish Jesus to support Israel's military and national interests has a long history, stretching back, at least, to the formative era of Zionism. As Neta Stahl has shown, early twentieth-century Zionists periodically employed Jesus's Jewishness in their attempt to dissuade Jews away from the ease of Christian Europe and toward the hard, pioneering life of Mandate Palestine. Such thinkers characterized Jesus as a modern Zionist, intent on living in and defending his homeland, a "native Jew growing up in the Galilee," whose desire for the land made him an ideal "model," in Stahl's words, "for Jewish nationalism."[12] Jesus thus became a representative Jew. The true, historical Jesus, it was argued, sought to redeem the Jewish nation in the land,[13] but he was entirely misunderstood by the texts and church of the Christians[14] and so was "severed from his national origin by becoming the object of worship of European Christianity."[15] In a particularly striking 1924 poem, Uri Zvi Greenberg, later one of Israel's greatest poets and a Member of Knesset, directly exhorts Jesus to leave the monasteries of Palestine and to join the Zionist project as a return to his Jewishness.[16] It is of little surprise that British authorities in that same decade, who supported Zionist claims at the time, repeatedly pressured Orthodox Church authorities to give up swaths of its monastic lands to Zionist groups.[17]

Several other Zionist thinkers of the Mandate period used the Jewishness of Jesus along similar lines, but this time as a metaphor for the Jew crucified in Europe who needed to be "raised again" in the Land of Israel.[18] In the aftermath of the Holocaust, this metaphor took on new significance—now in the hands of Western Christian thinkers who came increasingly to associate the Jewish Jesus with the Jewish State. Thus, the namesake of Franklin Littell's 1975 book, *The Crucifixion of the Jews*, which employs the particularity of Jesus's Jewishness to speak of Jews as recently crucified in Europe and raised again in the State of Israel.[19] John Oesterreicher, in 1971, lambasted bishops in Jordan for protesting Israeli building

[12] Neta Stahl, "Jesus as the New Jew: Zionism and the Literary Representation of Jesus," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11 (2012): 1–23, here 5, 3 (describing Yoseph Klausner).
[13] Ibid., 6 (describing Aharon Avraham Kabak).
[14] See ibid., 3, 9.
[15] Ibid., 13 (describing Uri Zvi Greenberg).
[16] Uri Zvi Greenberg, "Earthly Jerusalem," cited in ibid., 11.
[17] See Laura Robson, "Communalism and Nationalism in the Mandate: The Greek Orthodox Controversy and the National Movement," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41 (2011): 6–23.
[18] Stahl, "Jesus as the New Jew," 14 (describing Greenberg).
[19] Franklin H. Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

projects in the newly acquired and invented Jerusalem,[20] reminding them that "Jesus, God's Word to all men, was a Jew, not a Jordanian."[21] Similarly, Roy Eckardt asserted a year earlier that Jesus would have been "an Israeli" in contemporary terms, and it is therefore "in an Israeli munitions factory" that one finds true Christian witness.[22] Given views such as these, it is a bit shocking that in his seminal and oft-cited 1985 *Novum Testamentum* article on the Johannine Jews, the celebrated New Testament scholar, John Ashton, included a gratuitous gibe only at Arabs, not fellow Westerners, for misunderstanding the difference between "Jew" and "Israeli."[23] But it is not as shocking as the eminent journal's choice to preserve the gibe.

Such was the environment of Western scholarship in the era of the "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus, where scholarly emphasis on Jesus's Jewishness as both goal and heuristic device frequently melded with anti-Palestinian dispositions.[24] A particularly significant and disturbing example comes from the writings of André Lacocque, the founder of a Jewish-Christian dialogue center in Chicago and contributing scholar to the Third Quest.[25] Though his work would promote Jewish-Christian rapprochement and contemporary understandings of Jesus as a "central" Jew of his day,[26] his efforts and scholarship came hand-in-hand with a

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[20] On Israel's unilateral creation of entirely new borders for what it thereafter called "Jerusalem," see Michael G. Azar "The 'Eternal and Undivided' Jerusalem and the Bible," *The Bible and Interpretation*. February 2018, https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/2018/02/aza428027.

[21] As quoted in "Judeo-Christian Studies Director Accuses Jordanian Bishops," *NC News Service*, April 22, 1971.

[22] As quoted in "See Christ in Israeli bombs," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 4, 1970. Eckardt makes a similar point in A. Roy Eckardt, *Your People, My People: The Meeting of Jews and Christians* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), 181–82.

[23] John Ashton, "The Identity and Function of the Ioudaioi in the Fourth Gospel," *NT* 27 (1985): 40–75, here 43.

[24] See, e.g., James G. Crossley, "Jesus the Jew since 1967," in *Jesus beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity*, ed. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton, and James G. Crossley (London: Equinox, 2009), 119–38 or Ömer Faruk Kalintürk, "Jesus the Jew: Survey on the Cliché in Its Context," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 64 (June 2023): 47–70. While neither of these sources, especially the latter, are without problems, they nonetheless clearly establish the political factors and ideologies at play in the increased scholarly focus on Jesus's Jewishness in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Such does not, of course, dismiss other factors, such as the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but merely adds to them.

[25] For more on Lacocque's biography, see the Society of Biblical Literature's tribute after his death in 2022, https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/LACOCQUE-obit.pdf .

[26] While Lacocque, like authors of the Third Quest, understands Jesus chiefly against his Jewish milieu, as the title of his 2015 book indicates (*Jesus the Central Jew: His Times and His People, Early Christianity and Its Literature* [Atlanta: SBL, 2015]), he employs this milieu toward understanding Jesus as a "normal" Jew of the first century, not a "marginal" or unusual Jew at odds with most other Jews. Cf. James Crossley's comments regarding the "Next Quest," especially as it contrasts with the Third Quest: "Rather than tagging 'very Jewish' onto reconstructions as a loaded rhetorical flourish or accusing more philosophical Jesuses as being 'not very Jewish,' the Next Quest will simply assume Jesus was Jewish. The Next Quest will analyze and contextualize ancient claims and perceptions of what it meant to be Jewish (or, if you prefer, 'Judean,' 'Galilean,' etc.) without imposing scholarly judgment on who was and was not a proper Jew or which elements of Judaism were supposedly in need of reform" ("The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 19 [2021]: 261–64).

particular disdain for Arabs and Palestinians, even Christians specifically. He angrily dismissed the claims of Arab Christian witnesses to the June 1967 war in a letter, arguing that Israel's fight with such people was a "confrontation between a western sensibility on the one hand and a vicious complex of inferiority on the other hand; between Einstein, Buber, Heschel...and...whom?"[27] Any ostensible "catastrophe" for the Arab people was simply the fault of Arabs alone, especially given, he claims, in a telling and salient summoning of ancient history, their widespread Marcionism:

> I do believe in the indefectible ties between God and his perennial People. … I do believe in the unity of Jesus of Nazareth and His People. I reject...the attempt of a certain wing in the church (the "Christian" Arabs for instance) to put themselves in the place of Israel. I consider as a self-condemnation the stupid Arab Christian refusal of the Old Testament as a whole and even of the mention of "Israel" in the New Testament.[28]

Finally, Lacocque concludes his letter by stating that he would not "cry crocodile tears on the Arab victims" any more than he would a mass murderer and rapist.[29] To do so would entail staying on the "left side of the Red Sea" and lamenting the first-born sons of Egypt rather than rejoicing "with Miriam."[30]

Thus, we arrive full circle: voices in Jewish-Christian relations, from the 1967 war to the current war in Gaza, have regularly employed Jesus the Jew, and Christianity's historic forgetfulness of that element, as a key tool to advocate for the military and national goals of the Jewish State. This constitutes little beyond a continued abuse of Jesus's Jewishness and does little in the service of genuine Jewish-Christian reconciliation—a reconciliation that reaches beyond Western political and theological dispositions.[31]

The Problem of "Appropriation"

Aside from run-of-the-mill, outright racism and false notions of a mythological "Judeo-Christian" West over and against uncivilized peoples—sentiments that indeed plague both North America and Europe, the epicenters of biblical and

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[27] Andre Lacocque, Letter to Howard Schomer (Executive Director, Specialized Ministries Department, National Council of the Churches of Christ), July 18, 1967, in "Middle East - collation of documents and comments prepared by Jerusalem Rainbow Group," Box 68, Folder 5, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, American Jewish Archives, 37-39.

[28] Ibid. Minor spelling errors in the original are corrected here. It isn't clear to what, if any, ostensible change to the Bible Lacocque is referring in the final sentence.

[29] Lacocque alludes to a famous 1966 Chicago murder case.

[30] The letter actually says "Mirian," but I have assumed this to be a typo.

[31] For a similar issue regarding "within Judaism" scholarship and Zionism, see Phillip La Grange Du Toit, "The Radical New Perspective on Paul, Messianic Judaism and Their Connection to Christian Zionism," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 (2017): 1–8.

theological scholarship[32]—there is a more subtle scholarly notion at the root of such abuses (though somewhat unwittingly). The notion, in fact, is expressed in the concluding paragraph to Lacocque's book on Jesus the "central" Jew, where, lamenting the ancient "rupture" between "the church" and "the synagogue" that caused the former to become ignorant of the Jewish character and context of its foundational people and texts ("Marcion did triumph," he says[33]), Lacocque concludes,

> The moment Christianity cut its moorings with Judaism (decisively in the fourth century but beginning long before that), it lost its "virginity" and began to harbor an incipient pagan mythological ideology. The main victim, I believe, was Jesus, the central Jew."[34]

Indeed, it has become an unremarkable trope in scholarship on Jesus's Jewishness to assert that the church, especially, but not exclusively, in the fourth century distanced itself from its Jewish roots and so continually became ignorant of the Jewishness of Jesus and his apostles. Whether the culprits are Christian bishops under the likes of Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, who gave new authority to earlier Christian attempts to separate from Jews,[35] or simply the slow progress of history as Jesus's movement became "no longer Jewish,"[36] the end result is the same: "Christianity becomes something other than Judaism and as a result, Jesus in retrospect is seen not as a Jew, but as something else, as a founder of Christianity."[37]

There is assuredly a myriad of historical reasons for such a trope. It is indeed clear that as the fourth century unfolded, Greek Christian writers came increasingly to identify with the Roman imperial state (though it happened neither as quickly nor as smoothly as it is often portrayed, especially vis-à-vis Syriac and other Christian writers), and the Christian mainstream generally identified less with contemporary Jews, often resulting in rhetorical and real (including imperially sponsored) violence against the latter. But this recognition must not lead, as it often does, to an unwarranted conflation of two related, but entirely different, historical

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[32] See, John van Maaren, *The Gospel of Mark's Judaism and the Death of Christ as Ransom for Many*, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 25.
[33] Lacocque, *Jesus the Central Jew*, 277.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Paula Fredriksen, for example, describes this era as a time in which the hierarchical "ideologues of separation" could enforce and further their "ideology of separation" with new power ("What 'Parting of the Ways?' Jews and Gentiles in the Ancient Mediterranean City," in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. A.H. Becker, and A. Yoshiko Reed [Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003]: 35-63, here 61–62).
[36] Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Ways That Parted: Jews, Christians, and Jewish-Christians, ca. 100–150 CE," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE*, ed. Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter J Tomson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 307–39, here 307.
[37] Shaye Cohen's summary assessment offered for the PBS documentary *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*, video, dir. William Cran (PBS Frontline, 1998), https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/bornliveddied.html.

realities: the ancient Christian explicit opposition to Jewish contemporaries and the reality of ancient Christian continuity with, and preservation of, its own, Second Temple Jewish past.[38] While several scholars no longer hold to such easy distinctions between "Jewish" and "Christian" (or "Gentile") or "Semitic" and "Greek," the sentiment still susurrates in scholarship in the frequent way in which scholars speak of early Christians as "appropriating" what were, and are, essentially "Jewish" things. In other words, they "took" something that was not theirs without the "owner's permission."[39] Thus, it has become commonplace to describe Christians as appropriating—and here I quote only a few representative examples—"the Hebrew Bible,"[40] the "Holy Land,"[41] or, most sweepingly, "the vocabulary and identity of the people of Israel."[42] Such language is overused and without sufficient historical justification. More problematically, it has all too easily, whether wittingly or not, combined with anti-Palestinian/-Arab hostilities to portray Christians of the Holy Land as the descendants of imperial appropriators, living in a land not genuinely theirs.[43] With this blend of ancient constructions and contemporary nationalist interests (often, as above, unabashedly expressed by the very same authors), the Jewish State, now closely identified with the long Christian-suppressed Jewish Jesus, can never "take," but only "reclaim" what has always belonged to it.

The Case of John of Damascus

The often strict scholarly judgment over what does and does not constitute Jesus's "Jewishness" and an equally strong judgment over what does and does not constitute the inherited and inherent "Jewishness" of later Christian tradition (both

[38] Examples of such conflating are frequent in scholarship on historical Jewish-Christian interaction, but one finds it especially in the modern myth that early Christians "broke" from their Israelite, even apostolic roots, to designate themselves the "New Israel." Such a phrase does not occur in early Christianity. See Michael G. Azar, "'Supersessionism': The Political Origin of a Theological Neologism," and "Israel: The People of God on Palm Sunday in the Orthodox Church," in *The Byzantine Liturgy and the Jews*, ed. Alexandru Ioniță and Harald Buchinger (forthcoming 2026), especially note 13 in the latter.

[39] A common definition in a variety of dictionaries. *Pace* Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 207–208, I do not take this to be a "neutral" term.

[40] Adam Gregerman, "Old Wine in New Bottles: Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41 (2004): 313–40, here 328.

[41] Oded Irshai, "The Christian Appropriation of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century: The Case of the Bordeaux Pilgrim," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009): 465–86, passim.

[42] Liam M. Tracey, "Worship," in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 448.

[43] Aside from the examples reviewed above, see especially Orit Hirt-Ramon, Ines Gabel, and Varda Wasserman, *"Jesus Was a Jew": Presenting Christians and Christianity in Israeli State Education* (Lanham: Lexington, 2020), which shows that Israeli state education has often employed Jesus's Jewishness—insofar as it has been acknowledged at all—as a means by which to present Christianity as an aberration of various degrees: Jesus was Jewish, and therefore more like *us* than like *them*; he was a Jew who had concern for the land and sought to reform Judaism, but whose "worldview" Christians "distorted" (here, 168).

often influenced by later and, especially, contemporary understandings of Jewishness), easily lead those concerned with Jewish-Christian reconciliation to overlook key moments in historic Christian texts that may prove useful for contemporary understanding of Jesus as a Jew (let alone understanding Christianity, even after the villainous fourth century, as a uniquely Jewish movement).[44] As one example, I turn to one of the most important Palestinian Christian thinkers prior to the modern period, and among the most significant saints in the Arabic-speaking Christian world: St. John of Damascus.

John's Context

Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn ibn Manṣūr,[45] later known by his monastic name of John, was born around 675 CE into the wealthy and respected Mansour family, an Aramean or Arab Christian family of Damascus.[46] Though surnamed Damascene in posterity, he left Damascus, and his service in the Caliphate, in the early eighth century and became a monk in Palestine. The Jerusalem John encountered in many ways bore striking resemblance to the Jerusalem of more recent history. While in John's day the Holy City "had already begun its journey to become after his lifetime the center of Arab Orthodox Christianity," it was also the focal point (along with Damascus) of a ruling power less concerned with the wellbeing of the Christian community than it was for its "program to claim the public space and the civil institutions" of its conquered territories (in this case, for Islam).[47] With this Muslim challenge, John's tradition "no longer enjoyed a privileged position with regard to Judaism or Manichaeism."[48] Jews, as a result of the preceding invasions (in which they were believed to have played a conducive role), had found a new boldness with which to critique the Christianity under whose yoke they no longer lived.[49]

[44] For a helpful exploration of these issues in the ancient period, see John Van Maaren, *The Boundaries of Jewishness in the Southern Levant, 200 BCE-132 CE: Power, Strategies, and Ethnic Configurations*, Studia Judaica 118 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

[45] منصور بن سرجون بن منصور. He likely took the name John (Yuḥannā) upon becoming a monk.

[46] Sidney H. Griffith, "The Manṣūr Family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times," in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, ed. Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016), 29–52, here 30. John wrote his works in Greek, but his family background, as typical of Melkite Christians of the region at the time, were at the cross-section of multiple linguistic cultures. As Griffith explains, "In all likelihood, the Manṣūr family's native language was Aramaic, along with a ready familiarity with Arabic, the language of the Arab tribes that had been dominant in the region for generations prior to the emergence of the Muslim Arabs, who would establish a new hegemony in a new political configuring of the Levant. Greek would have been the language of public affairs, and eventually of church life in Damascus…" (31).

[47] Ibid., 33.

[48] Norman Russell, "Introduction" to John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2022), 15–51, here 36. This edition also contains both the Greek text and English translation used here.

[49] Medieval Eastern Jewry, much like medieval Eastern Christianity, was undergoing significant identity development and boundary strengthening under the Umayyads and later. See Anna Chrysostomides, "John of Damascus's Theology of Icons in the Context of Eighth-Century Palestinian Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 75 (2021): 263–96, here 285–87.

Still further, in addition to these external challenges, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem was struggling within the "climate of instability and infighting amongst the Chalcedonians of Palestine,"[50] as well as a sea of challenges from other (non-Chalcedonian) Christians. Amid these many troubles, John's work as a theologian and regular preacher in the Church of the Anastasis (Holy Sepulchre) in Jerusalem, until his death in 745 CE, served to reestablish and strengthen the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which had been disbanded by the Umayyads nearly 70 years prior and weakened by the Persian invasions just before.[51] In this capacity, his work, though firm in his Orthodox convictions, regularly sought common theological ground with the many disparate Christian factions in Jerusalem and among its many pilgrims who were coming to terms with what the new political situation meant for access to and authority over the Holy Sites.[52] The privileged place that Roman (Byzantine) rule had given the Orthodox patriarchate and Chalcedonian tradition was gone; only "rigorous argument" could offer "a potential way out of the impasses" of the disparate Christian strands.[53] Though he was anathematized soon after his death as "Mansour, the ill-named and Saracen-minded"[54]—due in part to his ill-regarded family background and famous willingness to oppose Roman Empire-sponsored iconoclasm "from the safe vantage-point of Arab Palestine"[55]—his astute theological works, ranging from poetry to polemic, had significant influence throughout the Orthodox world (and West), not only for their content, but also their form: John in many ways became a model from whom to learn how to adapt biblical and patristic sources with innovative, philosophical insight in order to address contemporary needs and challenges.[56] Posterity would eventually recognize him as the "last of the fathers."[57]

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[50] Vassa Kontouma, "John of Damascus (c. 655–c. 745)," 25, reprinted as Part I of Vassa Kontouma, *John of Damascus: New Studies on His Life and Works* (London: Routledge, 2023), 1–43.

[51] Scott Ables, "Development in Theological Method and Argument in John of Damascus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28 (2020): 625–53, here 627–28, 633.

[52] Ibid., 641, 643, 647, *et alibi*.

[53] Russell, "Introduction," 36.

[54] Μανσοὺρ τῷ κακωνύμῳ καὶ σαρακηνόφρονι, so named in the first of no less than four anathemas placed upon him at the 754 (iconoclast) Council of Hiereia (*ACO[Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum]*[2] 3.3:778–82 [Session 6]). On the reasons for these descriptions, which most have taken to stem primarily from Greek disdain for John's family background and political location, see Jamie Rall, "John of Damascus as 'Saracen-Minded': The Anathema of the Council of Hiereia in Light of Byzantine Iconoclasm and Early Islam," *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 67 (2023): 55–93. Relatedly, according to Theophanes, Emperor Constantine V ridiculed John by calling him "Manzeros"—a play on his family name which in a "Jewish manner" (=Hebrew/Aramaic) means "bastard" (Theophanes, *chron. A.M.* 6234; ET: *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, trans. Cyril A. Mango and Roger Scott [Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997, 578–579n7]).

[55] Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

[56] See Ables, "Development in Theological Method" and Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 35–36.

[57] Russell, "Introduction," 44.

John's Theology

John's key theological work in this struggle to shore up the Orthodox position in Jerusalem—and one that went on to have tremendous impact as Arabic-speaking Christianity continued to form in the next few centuries[58]—was *On the Orthodox Faith*, the third part (after *Dialectica*, a philosophical analysis, and *On Heresies*) of his trilogy, *The Fountainhead of Knowledge*.[59] Despite its potentially misleading name, *On the Orthodox Faith* is not a doctrinal treatise. Rather, adopting a genre of writing common especially to monastic texts (John, after all, was a monk of Palestine),[60] the whole of *Fountainhead*, but especially *On the Orthodox Faith*, reflects the central intention of its literary genre: "to present the monk with material for reflection in prayer."[61] With John, and the Orthodox tradition that follows him, one thus finds that theological understanding is not easily compartmentalized into "doctrines" (e.g., regarding Jesus's nature) and "practices" (whether liturgical, political, social, or otherwise). It constitutes, rather, an all-encompassing "way of life."[62] It is only in this light that one begins to grasp why a work entitled *On the Orthodox Faith* devotes so much time to matters ranging from why Orthodox Christians pray toward the East,[63] to the nature and types of seas,[64] from expected "doctrinal" matters like the Lord's descent into Hades,[65] to the movement of wind,[66] from analyzing the planets and stars,[67] to a careful delineation of how Christ is spoken of in Scripture and, therefore, how we must speak of him.[68]

John and Jesus the Jew

Near the end of this work, John recapitulates the preceding centuries of theology (namely, the "christological controversies") by strictly and meticulously delineating the various ways that Scripture speaks of Christ. He provides a guide for his readers that allows them to avoid any number of potential heresies that stem from conflating what Christ does "according to nature" (as God) and what he does "according to economy" (as human).[69] He begins by laying out four "general

[58] The text was translated into Arabic within the first couple centuries after John (by the end of the first millennium), as Arabic slowly became the vernacular for Orthodox Christians in the Eastern Mediterranean. See Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 84. John's influence is notably clear in the works of Theodore Abu Qurrah, one of the first Christian authors to write in Arabic.
[59] The dating of *The Fountainhead of Knowledge* is difficult to determine, but 720s–730s seem likely. See Louth, *St. John of Damascus,* 33–34.
[60] That is, the "century" genre (Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 35–37). Later editions of this work, however, reorganized the text and so lost the original century structure (ibid., 84–85).
[61] Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 37.
[62] Ibid., 37.
[63] *DF* [*Doctrina Fidei*, normally rendered in English as *On the Orthodox Faith*] 85.
[64] *DF* 23.
[65] *DF* 73.
[66] *DF* 22.
[67] *DF* 21.
[68] *DF* 91.
[69] κατὰ φύσιν and κατ' οἰκονομίαν (*DF* 91).

modes" (τρόποι γενικοί) in which we (following Scripture) speak about Christ: The first are those things said of Christ "before the incarnation" (πρὸ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως);[70] the second are those things which are said "in the union" (ἐν τῇ ἑνώσει),[71] and the third, those things which are said of Christ "after the union" (μετὰ τὴν ἕνωσιν)—that is, primarily, the ways in which the Gospels themselves portray him in his life and death. Of all the modes John describes, it is really only the third that has a home in contemporary biblical scholarship and, therefore, contemporary scholarly understandings of Jesus as a Jew.

This third mode, John divides into three sub-modes: those statements that indicate Christ's divine nature (e.g., "I and the Father are one" [John 10:30]); those that indicate his human nature (e.g., that he was born of a virgin or that he hungered), and those that indicate both (e.g., that he is "the Lord of glory" who was crucified [1 Cor 2:8]). The second submode—those things said of Christ "after the union" regarding his humanity—John further divides into six types: that which is said of Christ "naturally" (κατὰ φύσιν; e.g., that he was born or hungered); that which stems from his needing to appear as a typical human (e.g., not knowing where Lazarus was buried); that which is said on his account because he fully took on human nature (e.g., 1 Cor 15:28); words employed merely to understand Christ's actions (e.g., that he was a "servant"); statements said to reveal who he is and to strengthen our faith, and, finally, the sixth:

> …those things which are said in regard to [Christ's] making his own the *prosopon* of the Jews, insofar as he numbered himself among the Jews. As he says to the Samaritan, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).[72]

Prosopon—at one time simply meaning "face," "appearance," or "mask"—by John's time, had deep roots in patristic theology, particularly leading up to and away from the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), which emphatically acknowledged Christ "in two natures" united in one *prosopon*.[73] Often, but sometimes misleadingly, translated into English as "person," it was a word often used in patristic thought to describe the specific manifestation or physical appearance of a less tangible reality (and thus sometimes to refer to each "person" of the Trinity). Gregory of Nyssa called Christ "the *prosopon* of the knowledge of God" (undoubtedly with license from 2 Cor 4:6);[74] numerous writers speak of the author of the Psalms as

[70] These, John divides into six submodes, each having to do with Christ as God and Son of God.
[71] These statements, John divides into three submodes, each of which entails a "high" or "low" aspect of the central claim that in Christ's hypostatic union (τὴν καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἕνωσιν), God becomes flesh, and flesh is deified (θεόω) to become God. John's emphasis here on Christ *in* the union is clearly a defense of the Chalcedonian/Melkite/Orthodox position challenged by the variety of Christian groups at play in John's Jerusalem.
[72] Τὰ δὲ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ Ἰουδαίων προσώπου οἰκείωσιν μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀριθμῶν ἑαυτόν, ὡς πρὸς τὴν Σαμαρεῖτίν φησιν· «Ὑμεῖς προσκυνεῖτε, ὃ οὐκ οἴδατε, ἡμεῖς προσκυνοῦμεν, ὃ οἴδαμεν, ὅτι ἡ σωτηρία ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐστίν».
[73] See *DF* 63 for John's conveyance of this basic Chalcedonian point.
[74] *Ep. Pet.* 8 (often, but wrongly, labeled as Basil, *Ep*. 38.8).

the "*prosopon* of Christ";[75] and still more speak of the single author writing on behalf of the community as the "*prosopon* of the Jews."[76] Though John employs, along with the tradition that preceded him, the word in a variety of ways, he nonetheless defines it in *Dialectica*: "*Prosopon*" denotes "the very thing which, through its own actions and properties [τῶν οἰκείων ἐνεργημάτων τε καὶ ἰδιωμάτων], provides for us a manifestation distinct and set off from those of the same nature [τῶν ὁμοφυῶν]."[77]

Though "Jewishness" can easily become an artificially constructed heuristic device whose usefulness only extends as far as the quality of the semantic domain that its users assign to it, John nonetheless clearly here has some sense of what we might now call "Jewishness." Whereas in a previous submode, John describes those things that resulted from Christ's "making his own" (οἰκειούμενος[78]) the human "*prosopon*" in general (e.g., speaking as a forsaken human on the cross when as God he could never be forsaken [see Matt 27:46]),[79] here he speaks more specifically of those things that resulted from Christ's "making his own" (οἰκείωσιν) the *prosopon* of the Jews.[80] Jesus's "Jewishness" is itself one of the important categories through which the Savior ought to be understood. It is one of the ways one can, and should, speak of the one and only Christ "as human after the union." It is not enough, it seems for John, to grant that Jesus became human, but that he made the "face of the Jews" his own.[81] The significance of his points here is further foregrounded by the literary context in which they occur: that is, he includes them amid a sea of topics in the final section of *On the Orthodox Faith* that appear chosen

[75] E.g., Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 2.605.

[76] E.g., Ps-Athanasius, *Ex. Ps.* 27.272. English translations often translate the term as "character."

[77] *Dialectica* 44 (Greek) 43 (ET). The Greek is P.B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 1, Patristische Texte und Studien 7 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969): 47-95, 101-142. The English translation (though not used here) is John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, FC 37 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1958).

[78] On various ways in which Christ "makes" something "his own," see *DF* 69. The verb/noun is often translated as "appropriate" or "appropriation," but such loses the "home" (οἶκος) connotation of the Greek.

[79] John emphatically dwells on Christ having made the human *prosopon* his own in, e.g., *DF* 68.

[80] In the former, John uses the verb, οἰκειόω/οἰκειόομαι, and in the latter, the noun, οἰκείωσις. To be sure, one should not confuse φύσις (nature) and πρόσωπον (face): whereas Christ "makes his own" the singular human "nature" (and thus deifies it; see *DF* 74 or 82) in one "*prosopon*" (a point made by Chalcedon), John can speak of Christ adopting the general "face" (*prosopon*) of humanity or the "face" of Jews specifically.

[81] There is much to explore here between John's choice of words and Levinasian ethics (namely, the centrality of "the face" of the other), but, alas, such is outside the scope of this essay. The sources on this prominent and well-known feature of Emmanuel Levinas's thought are many, but see, e.g., Diane Perpich, "Levinas and the Face of the Other," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 243–58. Given the foci of my exploration above, one would also need to consider Levinas's troubled and problematic approach to Palestinians. On this, see, e.g., Jason Caro, "Levinas and the Palestinians," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35 (2009): 671–84 and, on the reception of Levinas's statements about Palestinian, see O. Eisenstadt and C. E. Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian: A History of an Error," *Telos* 174 (2016): 9–32.

primarily to defend Christian practices that set Christians apart from Jews, Muslims, and Manichees (including, in this case, exegesis).[82] His comments more specifically follow a slew of topics that seem chosen because they had often been fertile ground for anti-Christian Jewish challenges in particular, such as the veneration of saints and icons,[83] reverence for the cross,[84] Mary's legitimate Hebrew ancestry,[85] the unity of Scripture,[86] and, soon after, sabbath and circumcision.[87]

Despite John's recognition here of something akin to Jesus's "Jewishness," one should note that he is not, per se, speaking here of a "historical Jesus," let alone a Jewish Jesus, *outside* of Scripture. Consistent with his general tendency to focus more on what Christ *is* in the incarnation (namely, the unity between humankind and God who opens up the possibility for humankind to become the image of God that it was meant to be[88]) rather than what he *does* (though that is of course important), John does not chiefly offer a historical claim about what "Jesus was," but an exegetical guide for understanding who he *is* in Scripture. What is to be known about who Jesus is can be known from the Scriptures where the Word continues to become incarnate (whether in Gospels, Psalms, Prophets, or any other portion). After turning to the fourth and final mode (those things which are said of Christ after the resurrection), John concludes with a relatively straightforward admonition, recalling his goal to provide an exegetical guide that would assist in keeping readers of Scripture from heretical misunderstandings of Christ: "One should therefore attribute the sublime things to the divine nature that is superior to the passions and the body, the humble things to the composite nature, that is to say, to the one Christ, who is God and our Lord Jesus Christ. For if we know what is proper to each and see both as performed by the same subject, we believe correctly and will not be in error." Such was the basic point of Chalcedon, which John had come so thoroughly to defend in his fractured Jerusalem.

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[82] See Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 185. While Louth does not include Manichees here, Kotter's critical text does (see also Russell, "Introduction," 42–43).

[83] *DF* 88–89. The issue of icons was a fertile ground for Jewish anti-Christian critique, though it was hardly a settled internal issue for Jews at the time (or Muslims, for that matter). See Chrysostomides, "John of Damascus's Theology," 273, 285. John's particular resistance to Jews vis-à-vis icons, such as he expresses in *On the Holy Icons* II, seems to have been closely related to his resistance to the Roman (Byzantine) emperor (Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 205–206).

[84] *DF* 84. Louth suggests that John's defense of the veneration of the cross in *On the Orthodox Faith* is due largely to the "attacks" on such veneration that "seem to have come from Jews in the seventh century" (Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 182; see also 210–211). Vassa Kontouma fittingly observes: "In effect, the Damascene, a priest of the church of the *Anastasis* in Jerusalem, considers the Cross practically as a sacrament" ("The *Fount of Knowledge* between Conservation and Creation," reprinted as Part V of Vassa Kontouma, *John of Damascus: New Studies on His Life and Works* [London: Routledge, 2023], 1–20, here 13).

[85] *DF* 87. On Jewish anti-Christian polemic regarding Mary, see, e.g., Robert C. Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 502–42.

[86] *DF* 90.

[87] *DF* 96 and 98 respectively.

[88] Very briefly stated. See further Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 177–79.

Conclusion

Surveying John's life and work as a whole, it is clear that the topics he addressed were not arbitrarily chosen but occasioned by the real needs of the role in which he found himself: as a preacher in the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem, a city with a fragmented Christian community facing numerous challenges from Jews and Muslims.[89] In this environment, the so-called "divine" ways of speaking of Christ and the correct way to speak of him "after the union" were of utmost importance; it was on these points that the Christian community was most divided (and to which Muslims were most opposed). John's concern about how to speak of Christ properly as a Jew was—to say the least—not at the top of his list. While he more than once sought common ground on which to dialogue (that is, debate) with Jews and Muslims in his Palestinian context (often to defend Christianity from the Muslim majority or the newly emboldened Jewish minority),[90] there is little evidence to indicate that Jesus's Jewishness was (or was intended to be) one of these common grounds. Jesus's "Jewishness" was not something that Jews positively claimed for themselves—especially as a challenge to the Jesus (or "Christ of faith") of the Christians—until the modern period. And even then, it has seen a somewhat shaky reception among Jews, notably within Orthodox Christian-Jewish dialogue.[91]

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[89] Cf. Griffith, "The Manṣūr Family," 35: "It is striking how readily the topical profile of John of Damascus' works corresponds both sociologically and theologically with the church-defining concerns of the Christian communities in Syria/Palestine during the time of his sojourn in Jerusalem." Though John firmly opposes counters them on a variety of grounds throughout his work (again, especially is *On the Holy Icons* 2), the moments are a distant third to those in which he confronts Muslims or other Christians. On the latter two, see Petros Tsagkaropoulos, "The Religious Other in the Homilies of John of Damascus: References to the Christian Confessions and Muslims of the Middle East," *Studia Patristica* CXXX (2021): 171–82.

[90] See, e.g., Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 103. It is worth noting that in the volume that precedes *On the Orthodox Faith* in *The Fountainhead*, John describes "Judaism" (Ἰουδαϊσμός) as one of the four great "systems of thought" (alongside Barbarism [Βαρβαρισμὸς], Scythism [Σκυθισμός], and Hellenism [Ἑλληνισμός]) from which all others derive (*On Heresies* 1–4 and 14–20; John derives much from Epiphanius's *Panarion*). Indeed, the title *On Heresies* is slightly misleading, given that John here employs αἵρεσις to mean more simply "system of thought," not a teaching directly opposed to Orthodox doctrine, per se. Nonetheless, it is clear for him that a αἵρεσις is well outside the bounds of the Orthodox Catholic tradition (cf., e.g., his choice to designate Audians as a "sect" or "faction" rather than "heresy" [*On Heresies* 70]). Relatedly, see John's eschatological musings on the antichrist, Jews, and the latter's eventual salvation (*DF* 99).

[91] In his paper delivered to the 1979 second international bilateral meeting between Orthodox Christians and Jews, Michael Wyschogrod posited the rejection of tradition and promotion of *sola scriptura* among the Protestant Reformers was fittingly rooted in Jesus's own rejection of Jewish tradition. The Orthodox interlocutors took great exception to this characterization of Jesus. Bishop Antony, for example, responded with concern for what this says not only about Jesus but the tradition after him: "I think the truth is that Jesus rejected certain traditions, or, more accurately, that he interpreted them in a new, spiritual way. … Do Jews think that Jesus placed himself completely outside the Jewish tradition, that he denied it? Is there still a continuity between the two Traditions, as for example, when we recognize the continuity of the two written Testaments? Is the situation different with regard to Tradition?" For this exchange, see Nifon Mihaita, ed., *The Christian Orthodox-Jewish Consultation II*, 1979, 17–18 and 31. For their part, many Greek participants on the Orthodox side at an earlier meeting unfortunately

Given where we started this essay—with recent, nationalistic uses of Jesus's Jewishness that mischaracterize, ignore, or oppose those who claim to follow the teachings of Jesus and still share John's faith in the Holy Land—perhaps we ought to learn not just from what John says, but what he does: Changes in social and political history in John's time caused him to prioritize some aspects of theology over others (namely the innovative articulation of Chalcedonian Christology and Christ "in two natures"). So also in the contemporary environment, the realities of the ongoing Nakba, historic Christian views of Jews, the Holocaust, and Jewish views of Christians might cause Jesus's Jewishness to become analogously as important in Christian theology as Jesus's divine nature and incarnation were in John's era. It is an element of theology that needs to be elevated, in other words, not only because of past Christian "forgetfulness" or hostility toward Jews (the chief reasons for which it has typically surfaced in Jewish-Christian dialogue) but because of its abuse by scholars and thinkers who continue to weaken historical awareness with nationalistic interest.

As with John's era, so also now: the particularities of Jesus's identity that one chooses to foreground often elucidate far more about one's social, theological, and political environment and interests than it does about the first century.[92] While Jesus should not be described as a particular "kind" of Jew for specific Christian purposes,[93] his first-century particularity should also not be abandoned or relegated for Zionist purposes. Perhaps alongside the "face of the Jews" that Christ "made his own," the contemporary context demands that we foreground a variety of the other possible particularities that he "made his own": "the face of the Bethlehemites," the "face of the Nazarenes," the "face of the Galileans," or the "face of the Syrians in Palestine" (a title, often overlooked, that Josephus uses for his own people).[94] Such, one hopes, can further help to prevent constructions of Jesus's Jewishness from being used for political or military domination. Only with such attentiveness to the complexities of Scripture and the Jesus it presents, alongside a willingness to confront historic and contemporary abuses, can one's understanding of Jesus's particular Jewish identity—whether as a Bethlehemite, Nazarene, Syrian, or, indeed, Palestinian—begin to serve genuine Jewish-Christian reconciliation that takes into full consideration those who bear the name of Christ in the land in which he lived.

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tended to confirm the notion that Christianity was chiefly a Hellenistic movement (see the collection of essays in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 22.1 [1977]).

[92] On the way in which the "Within Judaism" paradigm in biblical studies has fused historical criticism with ideological interests (often mistaking the latter for the former), see John Van Maaren and Valérie Nicolet, "Ethics of New Testament Scholarship," in *The Future of New Testament Studies: Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance*, ed. Clarissa Breu, LNTS (London: Bloomsbury, 2026).

[93] 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.

[94] "Now it is clear that no other Syrians in Palestine practice circumcision except us" (Josephus, *A. J.* 8.262). Josephus here is responding to Herodotus's centuries-old claims regarding the practice of circumcision among those "in Palestine" (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.104). Elsewhere, amid a similar interaction, Josephus again explains that, of "those who live in Palestine," only "Jews" practice circumcision (*C. Ap.* 1.171; my thanks to Joseph Sievers for this latter reference). Cf. Exod 15:14; Isa 14:29.