

# Representing the Jewishness of Christ Jesus in Children's Books

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

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Christian education and instructional materials for children remain peripheral in Christian-Jewish scholarship.<sup>1</sup> There is little regular or ongoing critical review or expert oversight of the production of children's Bibles and Sunday school materials. In Germany, where Protestant and Roman Catholic instruction is integrated into state-funded public education, stereotypical illustrations of Jews and Judaism in children's bibles and textbooks have come under scrutiny. In collaboration with the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the ministries of education have developed criteria to compel publishers to address negative and prejudicial representation of Jews and Judaism in Christian public school instruction.<sup>2</sup> I have been part of these discussions as part of a project called *Bildstörungen* [*Unsettling Images*], charged with disrupting and replacing religious clichés and caricatures that transmit hostility to Judaism.<sup>3</sup> This essay will first draw attention to the history and artistic conventions of misrepresenting Jews in Christian art and children's books before introducing a recent German publication that experiments with different visual and textual strategies to make the Jewishness of Jesus meaningful to Christian children.

People learn to distrust and fear Jews in subtle and not so subtle ways. Nobody is born an antisemite. This learning process begins in children's books, often in

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Jill Levine, “Parables and Jew-Hatred,” in *Perspectives on the Parables: Then and Now*, eds. Mikeal C. Parsons and Lanie Howard Walkup (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming 2026).

<sup>2</sup> *Darstellung des Judentums in Bildungsmedien. Gemeinsame Erklärung und gemeinsame Empfehlungen des Zentralrats der Juden in Deutschland, des Verband Bildungsmedien und der Kultusministerkonferenz* (Beschluss des Präsidiums des Zentralrats der Juden in Deutschland vom 14.10.2024, Beschluss des Verband Bildungsmedien vom 15.10.2024, Beschluss der Kultusministerkonferenz vom 13.12.2024);

([https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen\\_beschluesse/2024/2024\\_12\\_13-Darstellung-Judentum-in-Bildungsmedien.pdf](https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2024/2024_12_13-Darstellung-Judentum-in-Bildungsmedien.pdf)) (last accessed 10/12/2025); Jan Woppowa and Winfried Verburg, eds, *Antisemitismuskritik in Religion Unterrichten* 6 Vol 1 (2025), 1-192.

Julia Spichal, “Licht aus Schatten. Vorurteilsfreie Kinderbibeln als Grundlage für eine Erziehung nach Auschwitz,” *Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung im Kontext* (Stuttgart: Stuttgarter Lehrhaus, 2025), 176-182. <https://www.vr-elibrary.de/toc/reun/6/1>

<sup>3</sup> *Bildstörungen: Elemente einer antisemitismuskritischen Theologie und Religionspädagogik* (2020-2024). Funded by Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism at the Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin.

<https://www.eaberlin.de/antisemitismuskritische-bibelauslegungen/>

subliminal and non-verbal messages that are emotionally charged and shape perceptions (prejudices) about Jews and Judaism.

A single picture like the one below, taken from a popular children's bible,<sup>4</sup> conveys core elements of classic antisemitism: a Jewish conspiracy and a betrayal bought by corrupt money is at the heart of classic antisemitic propaganda, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>5</sup> Without mentioning the word "Jew," such an image instills suspicion and dread even in young children. At the same time, this image is instantly readable to all Christians everywhere as a visualization of the passion story.



Jewish figures conspire to kill Jesus, paying Judas to betray him.

Contemporary authors and illustrators do not intentionally and willfully retain the "teaching of contempt," as diagnosed by Jules Isaac. Nevertheless, many artistic renditions and literalist retellings of the passion story continue to ignore the "Ten Points of Seelisberg." Written at an "Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism," in Switzerland in 1947, the "Ten Points of Seelisberg" was inspired by the work of the French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac.<sup>6</sup> Point 6 asks Christian educators to avoid depicting "Jews in the exclusive sense of the enemies of Jesus," while Point 2 asks teachers and preachers to "remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel." Eighty years later, neither the Jewishness of Jesus nor the Jewishness of his enemies has been definitively transformed in word and image.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Bartos-Höppner and Renate Seeling, *Die Große Kinderbibel* (Berlin: arsEdition, 2008), 128-129. This image and others not from *Gute Nachricht. Geschichten von Jesus für Kinder fair erzählt* (see below) are used with the permission of their respective publishers and in compliance with the United States Code, Title 17 - Copyrights, Chapter 1, §107: Limitations on exclusive rights: Fair use, which permits fair use of copyrighted materials for nonprofit educational purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Forged Propaganda, 1903, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion>

<sup>6</sup> "An Address to the Churches. Ten Points of Seelisberg" (August 1947) <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/seelisberg>.

<sup>7</sup> Volker Menke, *Nur durch die Wurzel blüht auch ihr. Kinderbibeln im Lichte des christlich-jüdischen Dialogs* (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 2014).

In Germany, in particular, the Jewishness of Jesus has a fraught history, as the “Aryan Jesus” became state-sponsored church teaching during National Socialism. Protestant supporters of Nazi ideology founded the *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* [Institute for the research and elimination of Jewish influence on German church life] in Eisenach that sought to prove historically and theologically that Jesus was never Jewish but Aryan and an avowed enemy of Jews and Judaism.<sup>8</sup> The exegetical scholarship distributed by the Eisenach Institute proved quite influential and durable. Particularly the writings of New Testament scholar Walter Grundmann remained widely available after the collapse of National Socialism. His books, written during and after 1933-1945, denying the Jewishness of Jesus did not magically disappear after 1945, as it had not appeared suddenly in 1933.

### The Jewish and the Aryan Jesus

Already in 1879, a notorious scandal erupted over a painting by the Jewish painter Max Liebermann of Luke’s story of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-54). Liebermann depicted a Jewish boy in earnest discussion with Jewish sages, which unleashed a nationwide scandal. Adolf Stöcker, the founding father of political antisemitism and Protestant preacher at the Prussian court in Berlin, organized a ferocious media and political campaign against Max Liebermann, accusing him of insulting and denigrating Christianity. The Bavarian Landtag debated over two days and threatened to cut off all funding to the Munich artists union (of which Liebermann was a member) to force the withdrawal of the painting from the Internationale Kunstausstellung [International Art Exhibition] in Munich.<sup>9</sup> Liebermann eventually complied and not only withdrew his submission but changed the painting. Only a grainy photograph remains of the original.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver Arnold, “Entjudung” von *Theologie und Kirche*. Das Eisenacher “Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben” 1939–1945 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus. Christian Theologians and the Bible in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Marion Keuchen, “Die Darstellung des Judentums in christlichen Kinderbibeln am Beispiel des 12-jährigen Jesus im Tempel.” *Kinderbibel-Kindertora-Kinderkoran, Bibel und Kirche* 1/18 (2018); Regis Burnet, Matthieu Somon, “Jesus among the Doctors or Jesus against the Doctors? On Some Discrepancies between the Visual and Textual Exegesis of Lk 2:41–45,” *Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts* 5, 2021; Claudia Janssen, “Blickwechsel. Beobachtungen zum zwölfjährigen Jesus im Tempel,” *Bibel und Kirche* 4/2022; Verena Lenzen, “Jüdische Jesusforschung und israelische Kunst als Inspiration des jüdisch-christlichen Dialogs, in *Christologie zwischen Judentum und Christentum*, eds. Christian Danz, Kathy Ehrensperger, and Walter Homolka (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Der\\_zwölfjährige\\_Jesus\\_im\\_Tempel\\_Original.jpg#/media/File:Der\\_zwölfjährige\\_Jesus\\_im\\_Tempel\\_Original.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Der_zwölfjährige_Jesus_im_Tempel_Original.jpg#/media/File:Der_zwölfjährige_Jesus_im_Tempel_Original.jpg)



(Left:) Max Liebermann, Original. Wikimedia, public domain.

(Right:) Max Liebermann, “Jesus among the doctors,” 1879. Wikimedia, public domain.

It shows a young, slightly hunched Jesus surrounded by attentive Jewish scholars in a synagogue (the Amsterdam synagogue served as model). Liebermann paints Jesus as a poor Jewish boy, barefoot and with disheveled dark hair, who gesticulates with his hands to make his point. He is set amidst “the doctors” who surround him and listen intently. The scene evokes the atmosphere of any “shul” where knowledge of the Torah is tested and interpretations are discussed.

Liebermann’s altered painting hangs today in the Hamburg Kunsthalle.<sup>11</sup> His changes “aryanize” Jesus into an angelic child, dressed in a flowing white tunic. He wears sandals and has straight blond hair. His hands are no longer motioning but held close to the chest, as he explains calmly and with authority. He stands in the light, while the stern thoughtful priests recede into the darkened background. The artistic conventions of lightness and darkness, foreground and background, superiority and inferiority are reinstated.<sup>12</sup>

Liebermann’s artistic rendition of the Jewish Jesus is part of the nineteenth century reclamation of Jesus, influenced prominently by Abraham Geiger.<sup>13</sup> This German Jewish outreach and invitation into Christian-Jewish dialogue was mostly and cruelly rebuffed by the rising tide of antisemitism in church, state, and university. The virulence of the Christian reaction traumatized Liebermann and he vowed never again to paint religious themes. This outreach was not limited to Germany

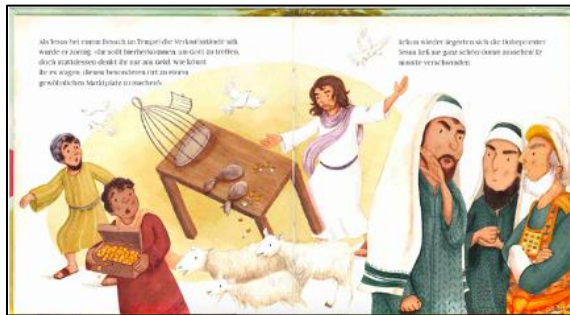
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/de/der-jesus-skandal> (last accessed October 13, 2025)

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Twelve-Year-Old\\_Jesus\\_in\\_the\\_Temple#/media/File:Der\\_zwölfjähriqe\\_Jesus\\_im\\_Tempel.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve-Year-Old_Jesus_in_the_Temple#/media/File:Der_zwölfjähriqe_Jesus_im_Tempel.jpg)

<sup>13</sup> Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); Walter Homolka, “Jewish Jesus Research. Catalyst for a Contemporary Christology?” in *Christologie zwischen Judentum und Christentum*, eds. Christian Danz, Kathy Ehrensperger, and Walter Homolka (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2020), 17-29.

either. During our project discussions, Yonatan Moss drew attention to other contemporaneous Jewish efforts to reclaim the Jewishness of Jesus such as the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch (1880-1957), who in 1902 portrayed Mary as a Jewish woman who endures violence, persecution and pogrom.<sup>14</sup> These Jewish artists, writers and scholars explored the meaning of the suffering of Jesus (and Mary) through their own experience of suffering in a world marred by pogroms, persecution, and eventually the Shoah.<sup>15</sup> From a Jewish perspective, Jesus's teachings and suffering resonate as a Jewish experience. For Christians, however, the Jewishness of Jesus is alienating and threatening—then and now.

While in the post-Shoah world few (respectable) Christian theologians would deny the Jewishness of Jesus, the meaning and theological implications of Jesus's Jewishness remain strangely unexplored. Especially in the context of Christian education, the Jewishness of Jesus remains at the surface level: his hair has become dark(er), his ethnicity takes a Middle Eastern hue, his dress consists of flowing robes, some head covering or shawls. What remains constant, however, is a rhetoric of exceptionality and antagonism, of battles between lightness and darkness, and divine superiority that contrasts against the flawed humanity of Jesus's Jewish environment. His uniqueness and exceptionality emerges in contrast to his Jewish surroundings and background.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, his enemies are coded by Jewishness, especially the Pharisees and scribes, priests and Sanhedrin, who are illustrated with dark beards and skin, wearing prayer shawls and head coverings, and various religious garb, while hovering close together whispering and plotting to arrest Jesus to execute him.<sup>17</sup> This illustration from a book by Antonia Woodward<sup>18</sup> is an example for the contrast between Jesus and his Jewish enemies, whose bushy eyebrows and elaborate dresses turbans and long beards marks them as Jews as they huddle together.



<sup>14</sup> Sholem Asch, "On a Carnival Night," in *Dos Naye Lebn* (New York, 1909).

<sup>15</sup> Walter Homolka, *Der Jude Jesu. Eine Heimholung* (Stuttgart: Herder, 2021)

<sup>16</sup> Relatedly, see Adam Gregerman, "A Unique Jew?: Judaism and Christology in Catholic and Protestant Theology," elsewhere in this collection.

<sup>17</sup> Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, "Die Macht der Bilder—Tendenzen des Antijudaismus in Bildwerken aktueller Kinderbibeln," in *Inventur. Schulbücher jüdisch-christlich bedenken. Antisemitismuskritische Perspektiven auf religionspädagogische Bildungsmedien*, eds. Joachim Willems and Ariane Dihle (Weinheim: Beltz-Juventa, 2025), 117-154.

<sup>18</sup> Antonia Woodward, *Das große Osterwunder* (Stuttgart: Gabriel Verlag, 2018), unpaginated.

Jesus is no longer Aryan, but he is not quite Jewish either. He is dressed in white and looks kind, even as he acts violently, while the Temple priests whisper secretively to hatch their plan.<sup>19</sup> Although German children's book authors generally avoid blaming "the Jews," they continue to exonerate Pontius Pilate, who washes his hands in innocence and appears to resist (Jewish) priestly pressure. While most Christian churches are committed to renouncing the deicide-charge, any reform appears to be stuck on the level of wording: it is no longer "the Jews" but the "religious leaders," "Jerusalem elites" or the "temple authorities" who bear primary responsibility.<sup>20</sup> It is still their money and power, conspiracy and betrayal, as gold coins roll across the Temple floor and Judas walks around with a bulging sack of silver pieces.

### A Jewish Jesus for Christian Children

A 2025 book, *Gute Nachricht. Geschichten von Jesus für Kinder fair erzählt* (*Good News: Stories of Jesus for Children Told Fairly*) aims to disrupt these visual conventions.<sup>21</sup> Written by a Jewish professor of early childhood education, Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, in cooperation with Protestant educators Ariane Dihle and myself, the illustrations were created by Marion Goedelt, the in-house-illustrator of Ariella Verlag, a small Jewish publisher in Berlin. The book contravenes religious boundaries in its production process but is aimed at Christian audiences willing to explore new approaches to the Jewishness of Jesus for children.<sup>22</sup>

The book does not portray the Jewish Jesus figuratively. We quickly agreed to forgo human representations to avoid reproducing ethnic clichés and religious stereotypes. Jewishness is not conveyed by skin color, hair style or distinctive garments. Religious codes for Jewishness, such as head coverings (*kippa*), prayer shawls (*Tallit*), fringes (*zizit*), beards and sidelocks are historically questionable. It

<sup>19</sup> The cleansing of the temple occurs in the beginning: John 2, 13-17

<sup>20</sup> This is in keeping with *Nostra Aetate* (1965), which affirms the guilt of "some Jews" while recognizing that "what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews today." Franklin Sherman, *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), Vol. 1, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, Ariane Dihle, Katharina von Kellenbach, *Gute Nachricht: Geschichten von Jesus für Kinder Fair Erzählt* (Berlin: Ariane Verlag 2025). The accompanying illustrations from this book are used with the kind permission of the publisher. See also Ariane Dihle, Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, Katharina von Kellenbach, Nacyie Kamcili-Yildiz, *Handreichung für pädagogische Fachkräfte, Lehrkräfte und Ehrenamtliche in der Kindertagesdienstarbeit zum Erzählbuch Gute Nachricht. Geschichten von Jesus für Kinder fair erzählt* (2025). <https://oops.uni-oldenburg.de/id/eprint/7289>. This team combined different interreligious and interdisciplinary expertise: Nina Kölsch-Bunzen has written several children's book but is not conversant in New Testament scholarship or its theological and artistic reception history. Her relationship with Ariella Verlag, a Jewish publisher raised questions about our intended audience: Were we trying to convert Jewish children by smuggling New Testament content into Jewish daycare and education centers? Would Christian parents and educators buy a book from a Jewish publisher? Which lines could be crossed, and which had to be respected? What constitutes core elements of Christian and Jewish identity that had to be respected?

<sup>22</sup> Nina Kölsch-Bunzen, *Gut aufgestellt gegen Antisemitismus? Die Förderung von Antisemitismusprävention in Kindertagesstätten und Schulen durch Kinderbibeln, Kinderkorane und Schulbücher* (Weinheim: Beltz-Juventa 2022).

is not historically established how Jews—belonging to different groups and classes—looked, dressed and prayed in different corners of the Roman Empire, including Galilee and Judea. We wanted to avoid the racial, ethnic and religious orientalism that abounds in children’s book illustrations. As discussed below, we aimed to unsettle the “hyperrealism” that derives from historical critical scholarship as well as fundamentalist literalism.

Instead, we experimented with the concept of **Jewishness as “textuality.”** Following Barbara Meyer’s *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory*,<sup>23</sup> the children’s book illustrates “Jewishness” as interactive participation in the storytelling and narrative corpus of the Torah, the Christian Pentateuch, prophets and writings. Meyer argues that Jewishness should not be considered “an adjective or attribute” but rather an activity “of self-reflection, memory and discussion”<sup>24</sup> that draws on the stories and traditions of the Torah.

For instance: instead of picturing a twelve-year old Jewish boy in the Temple (e.g., Max Liebermann), our illustrations evoke the story of Exodus as context and reason for Jesus’s journey with his family to Jerusalem on their annual pilgrimage for Pesach. Although explained by Luke, this setting is often ignored. The annual pilgrimage of Jews to Jerusalem for sacrifice in the Temple to celebrate the miracle of liberation of the children of Israel from the house of bondage in Egypt is the reason the twelve-year Jesus is in Jerusalem, as well as later, for his crucifixion. It was only after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE) that Pesach was reconceived by rabbinic sages as a celebratory ritual meal conducted at home during the Passover Seder.

While the text narrates Luke’s story of Jesus in the Temple, the illustrations along the margins of the text tell a secondary story: locusts, frogs, broken chains, and the parted waves of the Red Sea. Using symbols and codes, adults and children must engage in conversation to decipher the meaning of the images. Adult readers find the explanations at the end of the book and expand their inter-canonical knowledge and competence. The question-and-answer-format encourages discussion between adults and children, who search for connections and meaning together. The Jewishness of Jesus comes alive for Christian readers not for physical markers of ethnicity or religious garb but for his faithful observance and word-based fluency with the texts and traditions of Israel, that have become part of the Christian canon of the Bible. Using symbols rather than human persons in their historical setting, we alert Christian readers that the Bible should not be read as a history book that recounts particular facts and events. Rather, Biblical stories communicate theological messages that must be decoded and explained.

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Meyer, *Jesus the Jew*, 89-90.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, *Jesus the Jew*, 90.

## The Infancy Narratives

The birth stories of Luke and Matthew are another case in point. The Christian desire for a single, unified narrative is evident in Christmas pageants and nativity crèches that combine the two distinct Gospel accounts. Lucan shepherds and angels at the humble manger are melded with the Matthean Magi visiting Jesus's family at their "house" and his Exodus-based story of Herod's threats and their flight into Egypt. The creation of one master narrative flattens and diminishes the symbolic meanings of each story.

For Barbara Meyer, a "hermeneutics of polyphony" constitutes the second characteristic of Jewish continuity across the centuries. She argues that the textual traditions of the Pentateuch and the prophets, themselves polyphonous, serve as a common "platform inviting interpretation and discussion."<sup>25</sup> The New Testament shares this "Jewish" quality, although its polyphonous hermeneutics is often disguised. However, in its history, Christianity has sought to distill One Gospel truth that combines four distinct and sometimes conflicting accounts into one master narrative. Particularly in modernity, as the historical search for the life of Jesus intensified, polyphony became embarrassing and raised troubling questions of historical truth. Did Herod really kill all male children in Bethlehem? Was there a global census decreed by Caesar? Historical truth is one-dimensional, while scriptural truth is polyphonous. Misunderstanding the difference triggers anxiety and defensiveness.

Reading the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke through the lens of Jewish midrashic storytelling breaks anti-Jewish habits and creates opportunities for new interpretations. In the children's book, these stories are introduced with an explanation that the evangelists never met Jesus personally but were faithful followers committed to explain the deeper meaning of Jesus's life, death and resurrection to their communities. The "Afterword for Adults" introduces the term "midrash" as Jewish storytelling that seeks deeper scriptural meaning by exploring connections between different persons, plots, and patterns in the Bible. The four evangelists were steeped in this midrashic method and tell the truth of Jesus in words and events that speak "the language of the soul" (p. 16), as we put it in the "Introduction for Children." The gospels are presented as stories of faith not historical documentaries. Their authors were anonymous until they received their names later, by church tradition, represented by symbolic winged beings taken from a prophetic vision of Ezekiel 10:14



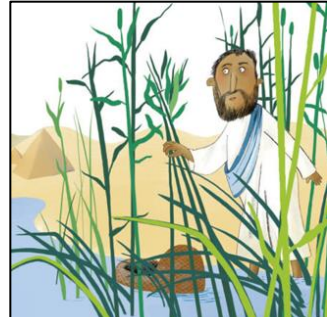
Note the symbols of the four evangelists on the book's cover, derived from Ezekiel 10:14 and Revelation 4:7.

<sup>25</sup> Meyer, *Jesus the Jew*, 90.

and mentioned in Revelation 4:7: Man (Matthew), Lion (Mark), Ox (Luke), and Eagle (John). The book's cover page evokes Ezekiel's chariot with its circular design for the four gospels. Their symbols appear in different form on each page of the book, as each birth story is attributed to its particular source.

The book tells of the birth of Jesus in four separate parts. Luke's account (represented by the ox) of Mary's Song (the Magnificat), the nighttime revelation to the shepherds, and the later visit to the Temple.

The narrative of the "flight into Egypt" found in Matthew (symbolized as a Middle Eastern-looking man, who can be mistaken for Jesus) peeks out behind reeds, observing the basket of Moses on the river Nile. The pyramids in the background allude to Pharaoh who threatened the first-born sons of the Hebrews, which Moses miraculously survived. Matthew's story of Herod's threat to Jesus and the children of Bethlehem, this intertextual illustration suggests, alludes to Moses's miraculous birth and rescue. The story of Jesus's flight to Egypt and eventual return after the death of Herod echoes, as Matthew himself affirms "what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son'" (Matt 2:14, NRSV). The Jewishness of Jesus becomes meaningful in the continuity of the Torah and the evangelists' participation in Jewish practices of intertextuality, polyphony and midrash. The story of Exodus provides the framework to tell Matthew's story of Jesus's flight into and return out of Egypt.



"Matthew" has the Exodus story of Moses's birth in mind as he writes about Jesus.

Christian educators, we heard in workshop and seminars, are startled and challenged by these allusions to Hebrew Bible narratives to illustrate Gospel stories. Adult Christian readers are compelled to expand their knowledge base of Old Testament texts by children's question about the images. They are also prompted into free storytelling to answer children's queries. As the authors of this children's book, we wanted to encourage these conversations in order to expand Christian familiarity with Jewish religious storytelling practices.

### **Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman**

Sometimes, the book's illustrations diverge radically from the text and interweave completely different stories. An example is the story of Jesus's provocative encounter with the Syrophenician woman. Mark (represented by the lion) tells the story of a conflictual encounter with the non-Jewish mother of a sick daughter. A tired Jesus "who did not want anyone to know he was there" (Mark 7:24) rejects the "Gentile woman's" desperate plea for help for her sick daughter in a notorious exchange. His dismissal of the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27), is jarring and has long irritated Christian interpreters. Anti-Jewish interpretations take this saying to denounce Jewish

particularity as arrogant, exclusive or indicative of racial and religious supremacy. Under the title “A courageous woman,” we draw attention to the courage and persistence of this argumentative Syrophoenician woman who challenges Jesus until he changes his mind.<sup>26</sup> The illustrations place this dispute in the context of the prophet Jonah, a story beloved by children because of the whale.



Jonah resists God’s call that sends him to the great, non-Jewish city of Nineveh. He (rightly) fears hostility and indifference from the non-Jewish population of Nineveh. Why would they listen to God’s judgment and condemnation if they are not in covenantal relationship with this God of Israel? Jonah flees on a ship in one direction but is forced to return in the belly of a whale in the other direction. The story of Jonah is a classic text of *teshuvah*, of a radical return to the will of God. In placing Jesus’s reluctance in the context of Jonah’s repentance, the radical change in Jesus’s position in response to the challenge of this Gentile woman attains a different meaning. Furthermore, the book of Jonah is a testament that God’s covenant of care and concern was not understood as “closed” in the Old Testament. Jesus is not the first Jew to consider the universal implications of the covenant. The boundary and reach of God’s covenantal care is discussed throughout the biblical canon, as shown by Jonah’s mission to the non-Jewish city of Nineveh. Jonah’s resentment resonates with Jesus’s refusal to heal the woman’s daughter, and both Jonah and Jesus change their minds and positions. Opening the covenant to the nations is not a break with Jewish traditions; indeed the Jewishness of Jesus becomes apparent within the scriptural frame of reference of Jonah.

### **A Jewish Christ: The Anointing**

Children assume that “Christ” refers to the last name of a person whose first name is “Jesus.” Many Christians are similarly unaware that the original meaning of the Greek term “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term “Messiah,” which originally meant “Anointed One.” We wanted to reframe the title “Christos”

<sup>26</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *The Difficult Words of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 75-99. See also her “Jesus the Jew: Nature and Nurture, Ethnicity, and Performance” elsewhere in this collection.

in its Hebrew-Jewish context for children, by highlighting the story of a woman anointing Jesus.

The story of a woman who anoints Jesus is told in all four gospels, although set at different times and locations, involving distinct persons and different meanings. Mark, Matthew, and John set this “first supper” in Bethany after the disciples’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.<sup>27</sup> Despite an explicit mandate to tell this story *In Memory of Her*,<sup>28</sup> this dinner is often eclipsed by the Last Supper during Holy Week. Traditionally, liturgy and art highlight the story of Judas’ betrayal, Jesus’s despair and abandonment in Gethsemane, and the denial of Simon Peter before daybreak. This somber mood of betrayal and persecution is linked to anti-Judaism, as the innocent suffering of Jesus generates hatred of his (supposed) enemies. Anti-Jewish violence has regularly occurred during Holy Week over the course of Christian history.

The story of the woman in Bethany disrupts this narrative. Here is one follower of Jesus who acts in solidarity and cares for his well-being in the face of impending calamity. According to the story, a woman anoints Jesus with expensive oil and is rebuked by disciples present. Jesus defends her and explains her act of kindness as preparation for his funeral. But there is another subtext, which we highlight in following Mark’s version (symbolized as lion). Our illustrations evoke the story of the shepherd David who defeated Goliath with a slingshot and was anointed king of Israel (crown) by the prophet Nathan. David was also a musician who played the harp and later composed many psalms. In the text, Jesus muses: “The idea occurs to him, that this woman could be a prophet who knows what will happen in the future. This is how respected powerful kings are anointed, but it is also how one prepares the dead for funerals. How does this fit together?” (p. 57). With this internal dialogue, the text connects the Davidic meaning of messianic kingship with the fear of impending death. Beyond the literal meaning of a woman’s act of kindness and care, this story refers to the Jewish meaning of Messiah as “Anointed One,” which sets Christ into the Davidic tradition of kingship.

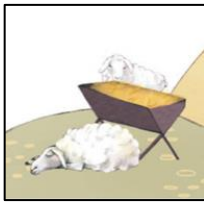


<sup>27</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 91-106.

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983).

## The Body of Christ and its Figurative Absence

There are no human bodies in this children's book (except for the symbol of evangelist Matthew): The creche in Bethlehem's stable is empty, as is the cross of Golgotha. What does this mean for Christology, when "Jewishness" is situated in the "word" rather than in the "flesh" (Jn 1:14)? Christianity is arguably defined by John's prologue which affirms that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have *seen* his glory"



(John 1:14). The visibility of the body and the physicality of birth, life and death are central to the doctrine of incarnation in the Christian tradition. With our decision to describe the "Jewishness" of Jesus intertextually rather than by physical markers of religion or ethnicity, it could be argued, we return the "Word" to the unseen and realm of imagination.



As a feminist theologian, I found the absence of male, bearded, Orientalized bodies liberating. Despite prodigious feminist exegetical scholarship, most Jesus films and children's books mention no more women than the three Marys: the Mother Mary, the "Girlfriend" Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the Sister of Lazarus and Martha. The world of Jesus is almost exclusively populated by bearded men, young and old, in flowing robes, debating, healing, eating, walking, fighting and suffering. Already in 1973, Mary Daly had objected to the "reification" of *God The Father*<sup>29</sup> and used the term "Christolatry" to denounce the objectification of the "creative power of the Verb"<sup>30</sup> in the Son and in an all-male, homoerotic Trinity. God, she argued, is better described as the verb "being" rather than a personified and therefore gendered "being." God should not be objectified into a Person, and neither the masculinity nor the Jewishness of Jesus can be considered relevant to salvation.<sup>31</sup> Any positive attribution of gender and ethnicity to God must be rejected as idolatrous.<sup>32</sup> The decision against figurative representation in our children's book creates the imaginative space to reconsider the meaning of the body of Christ for contemporary Christians.

Two contributors to this project also wrestle with Christology: Gregor Maria Hoff and Philip Cunningham introduce the concept of "semiotic Christology," and Didier Pollefeyt revives traditions of a "negative Christology" to challenge literalist misconceptions. Both contributions are concerned with literalism and the misuse of theological language, as they pertain to doctrines such as the virgin birth, death and resurrection, as well as the trinitarian relationship of "Father" and "Son" and "Holy Spirit" as natural or historical facts. Semiotics, write Hoff and Cunningham,

<sup>29</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God, the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God, the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 71.

<sup>31</sup> As if to remind us of the dangers of Jesus idolatry, Donald J. Trump recently posted an image of himself as Jesus on his Truth Social account. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/13/us/politics/trump-jesus-pope-leo-truth-social-post.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Levine, "Jesus the Jew: Nature and Nurture, Ethnicity, and Performance."

helps to liberate Christology from objectification by approaching it as a system of signs that point beyond themselves to a reality that transcends words and human understanding:

The signs employed in the meta-question, such as the terms “Jewish,” “identity,” or “Christ” become meaningful only through the process of semiosis by which signs come to express something real for their viewers. All signs receive and alter their meanings by their “reception” or engaged with by readers in changing environments over time. They thus constantly and automatically generate new interpretations of written texts.<sup>33</sup>

The “body of Christ,” on that view, should be considered a “sign” that transcends the male flesh of the Jewish Jesus and speaks of the presence of the transcendent (G-d) in community, an ephemeral and experiential reality rather than a measurable, biological object. The empty creche and cross alerts children to the paradoxical reality of this birth and this death, which is both like and unlike the natural corporal existence of ordinary people.

But: Is not the entire point of the incarnation, that G\*d (the spelling in the book) takes on a particular human body, is born a Jewish man, who lives in a particular place and time, suffers, and dies? Our collaborative Jewish-Christian team struggled particularly with three stories, namely the virginal conception of Mary and the role of Joseph, gory descriptions of suffering in the passion narrative, and the notion of Jesus’s death as sacrifice. These particulars have long been flashpoints of Jewish-Christian disagreement because they form the basis of Christological dogma. Although Jews and Christians traded polemics as the centuries passed, their most intense arguments were not over whether Jesus was a rabbi-like teacher of Torah, or a healer and miracle worker, or a prophetic figure who proclaimed the will of God for justice and peace to all humankind. Rather, it was Christian dogmas about his birth, suffering and death—foundational to Christian belief in Jesus as the Only Begotten Son, “the Word made flesh dwelling among us”—that were most vigorously contested by Jews over the centuries.

As the authors came to write about Jesus’s death, Nina Kölsch-Bunzen feared that the suffering body and the scenes of violence in the passion accounts would have traumatizing effects on children. Her text intentionally refrained from vivid and detailed descriptions of the cruelty in the passion story. Jesus’s arrest, his trial before Pilate, and his death on the cross are related without special reference to emotions. The illustrations—in the absence of a suffering body—present a bleak landscape with dark clouds, a denuded and broken plant and



<sup>33</sup> Gregor Maria Hoff and Philip A. Cunningham, “Thinking and Dialoguing about Jesus the Jew: A Semiotic Christology,” 2-3 also in this collection.

burst bubbles of hope. The death of Jesus, these images suggest, shattered all of his followers' hopes and dreams and signaled a catastrophic defeat for his vision of Jewish life in the Age to Come.

Under the heading "Jesus dies" (p. 63), the anguish and agony of the crucifixion is epitomized in Jesus's final prayer of Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This psalm, the text points out, was familiar to onlookers to the crucifixion who knew how the psalm continues and ends: "The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord... All the ends of earth shall remember and turn to the Lord. And all the families of the nations shall worship before him" (Ps 22:26-27). In citing Psalm 22 on the cross, the evangelist Mark expresses Jesus's despair but also points to the psalm's fervent future hope, which is not yet imaginable by the followers of Jesus.

For the Christian co-authors, somewhat habituated to portrayals of pain and torment in liturgy and art, such a "bloodless" account raised questions about the significance of the crucifixion for redemption as a sacrifice in atonement for "the wages of sin" (Rom 6:23). While this is one of many soteriologies, it has come under increasing criticism. Although the Protestant co-authors felt the need to address its absence, we agreed in the end to a minimalist description of the crucifixion as a defensible compromise. But the loss of a robust "theology of the cross," the potential for Gnosticism, and the emptying of eucharistic meaning in statements such as "this is my body, which is given/broken for you" (1 Cor 11:24) remained as nagging concerns.<sup>34</sup>

The violence of the cross is (still) a scandal. As a sign, it refers to an instrument of torture as well as to redemption. This ambivalence has long been implicated in Christian anti-Judaism, as Jews have been blamed for the violence of Christ's death, as Christians have reaped the benefits of atonement.<sup>35</sup> Displays of torment, including in children's books, risk inflaming anti-Jewish sentiments. This makes "live coverage" accounts of prevalent historical realism so dangerous. While our move toward abstraction may raise new problems, we avoid the emotional dynamic of violence that produces hard boundaries between "us" and "them," the "innocent good" and the "guilty evil" other.

We had no Jewish-Christian debates over the account of the resurrection. Under the heading "The Grave is Empty," the illustrations take up the (mustard) plant of the cross that is now in full bloom, as bubbles of hope rise up from the dark entrance of the tomb.

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<sup>34</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Collins, 1974).

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 36. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, *Elements of Antisemitism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 35.

The text follows Mark and Matthew and describes how the women went to the tomb after the sabbath, on the first day of the week, to purify and prepare the body. To their amazement they find the grave empty and encounter an angel/young man, who explains that Jesus is no longer in the tomb but raised by God. Their grief is transformed into joy as they run to the disciples to share the “good news.”

While the image of intangible fragile bubbles floating heavenward could be misinterpreted as suggestive of Gnostic dualism, where the soul/spirit separates from the body/matter, the language of Up and Down in the Raising up from the Dead is deeply embedded in traditional Christian doctrinal and liturgical language. The natural language of flowering and of soap bubbles of faith ascending heavenward from the darkness of the grave are conventional signs to speak about the resurrection. In the absence of the figurative body, these images provide the language to speak of hope, vision, and faith in the context of Easter in child-appropriate ways.



### **The Body of Christ is the Church**

We did not want to end with this heavenly gaze but returned the readers’ attention to the Body of Christ as the physical reality of the Church, again as represented by the four evangelists. Our story book for children concludes with their Gospels’ endings.



Mark ends with “they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere” (Mk 16:20, NRSV).

Matthew sends the disciples to Galilee where they meet Jesus who commissions them out to baptize “all of the nations... to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 27:55, NRSV).



Luke has the disciples return “to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lk 24:53, NRSV). [Luke traces the spread of the word from Jerusalem to Rome in his sequel Acts of the Apostles.]

John muses that “there are so many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25, NRSV).



These illustrations of the evangelists include not only their symbols but also scrolls, books, papers, pencils and feather quills, symbolic of the Word and the command to spread the word, to bring the good news to the nations. The Jewish-Christian authorial team wanted to convey the theological message of the (Jewish) Word that became flesh in the (Jewish) Jesus to dwell in embodied community in the nations of the Roman Empire. The “Risen Christ” takes bodily form in the community of the faithful, whose presence in the world is real and material. The truth of the messianic nature of the resurrection is measured in the experiential reality of community that is the gathering of nations in covenantal relationship with G\*d. While the goal of representing the Jewishness of Jesus Christ without ethnic and religious stereotypes compelled us to relinquish figurative illustrations of Jewish bodies, the embodied presence of the Risen Christ in communities of faith vouches and fulfills G\*d’s promise of redemption.

We do not know (yet) whether our readers and their children will succeed in decoding the intertextual symbols. In workshops and seminars, instructors have been both attracted by the newness and intimidated by the challenge. Even with extensive explanatory notes at the end of the book as well as an open-access manual available online,<sup>36</sup> instructors initially feel overwhelmed. The need to bridge the disconnect between text and image is unfamiliar to Christian educators. But with training, religion teachers appreciate the pedagogical potential of active engagement with narrative and symbol that is decoded collaboratively.

### **Conclusion**

Hyperrealism flattens the Word of God and reduces the life and death of Jesus to the story of a crime, committed by hypocritical Pharisees and evil temple priests, or alternatively, by Pontius Pilate and the Romans. We must break the hold of historical realism and literalism in Christian children’s literature. Taking anti-Judaism in Christian instruction seriously requires the rediscovery of symbolic storytelling (midrash) and the use of symbols that are decoded in playful conversation with children. Holy Scripture is not a history book, and theological language is not to be taken literally.

Didier Pollefeyt has found in his empirical study of Catholic education in Australia that the attempt to be hyperrealistic is a great weakness of contemporary Christian education. It “induces high levels of literal belief in children” but fails to

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<sup>36</sup> [https://narrt.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Handreichung-Gute-Nachricht-fair-erz\\_hlt-13.10.25.pdf](https://narrt.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Handreichung-Gute-Nachricht-fair-erz_hlt-13.10.25.pdf)

accompany young adults in their “transformation from literal belief into post-critical belief as the students grow older.”<sup>37</sup> In “Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good Is Bad,” he calls for a “framework of negative Christology as a complementary and corrective approach” that he further elaborates in his contribution to the *Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ* project:

At its core, negative theology asserts that the nature of God or ultimate reality is fundamentally beyond human comprehension and expression. Rather than making positive assertions about “what God is,” this approach focuses on “what God is not,” recognizing the ultimate inadequacy of affirmative statements to capture the essence of the divine.<sup>38</sup>

Young children need simple stories and easy illustrations. They do not need “rationalistic” and “rigid” explanations of what Christ is and is not. Instead, we need new instructional materials for children that not only provide accurate historical information about the Jewish world of Jesus, but that also leave the imaginative room for mystery and doubt, the wonder and irritation integral to Jewish and Christian storytelling.

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<sup>37</sup> Didier Pollefeyt, “Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good Is Bad. Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today,” *Religions* 12 (2021), 810, p. 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100810>  
<https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions>

<sup>38</sup> Didier Pollefeyt, “Jesus the Jew, the Mystery of Christ, and Jewish-Christian Relations,” 9, also in this collection.